

THE STORY THAT CONTINUES: THE ROLE OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN  
STUDENT FAITH FORMATION

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To Liz - my wife, best friend, encourager, and fellow adventurer.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project seeks to answer the question of “How can we help students form their own faith by identifying spiritual markers in their spiritual journeys and help them to understand their testimony as an ongoing work of God in their lives?” This research study was done through creating a two-leveled discipleship and research approach to help students grow in their own understanding of their stories of faith by hearing stories from others in the congregation and community’s faith stories and then learning how to articulate their own stories of faith to others. This research project was conducted with students at two different churches in the same community with two different denominational backgrounds. The thesis-project resulted in showing the power of understanding one’s own story personally and listening to other’s stories in the own personal faith formation and life decisions of students.



# **CHAPTER 1**

## **THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING**

### **The Central Question**

The big question of this thesis-project is, “How can we help students form their own faith by identifying spiritual markers in their spiritual journeys and help them to understand their testimony<sup>1</sup> as an ongoing work of God in their lives?” This is a question that has great importance because future generations embracing and living their faith is not only crucial to the passing of Christian doctrine to others, but it also aligns with the biblical mandate for parents to pass on faith to the next generation (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).<sup>2</sup>

The following thesis seeks to describe the ministry philosophy and discipleship approaches within the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church (Birmingham, AL), where I currently serve as Minister of Students. Our mission is to more effectively help students embrace their own faith while understanding that God is still at work in their lives. The thesis will also explore a secondary research group from the Inverness Vineyard Church (Birmingham, AL).

### **Objectives of this Project**

1. Create a shift in the thinking of students at MBBC and IVC regarding the role of God’s work in their lives toward the end that they might see their testimony as an ongoing work of God in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> The word “testimony” is being used throughout this thesis to describe students both understanding and bearing witness to the ongoing work of God in their own personal journeys of faith.

<sup>2</sup> As a part of the *Shemma*, Deuteronomy 6:7-9 serves as an Old Testament mandate for parents to faithfully pass faith along to their children. This is a command that was given to encourage parents to discuss faith and the teachings of God’s Word with their children within the context of everyday life. Faith formation of future generations was to be done in the midst of everyday life and everyday life conversations.

2. See high school seniors begin to take a deeper ownership of their own faith through a rite of passage experience for our high school seniors at MBBC, in which they will discover the power of the ongoing work of God in each other's spiritual journey. These student's spiritual journeys will also be shared with the rest of the students in our student ministry through senior share nights.
3. Provide resources and training materials to be used by other churches in order to help students to begin to own their own faith and spiritual growth through a rite of passage process for their seniors.

### **Ministry Setting**

With a staff of five full-time pastors, a Senior Pastor, a Worship Pastor, a Discipleship Pastor, a Children and Families Minister, and a Student Minister, and two part-time pastors, a Senior Adult Minister and a Preschool Coordinator, Meadow Brook Baptist Church (MBBC) in Birmingham, AL is a church with a large staff team that serves a congregation with an average weekly attendance of 350 in worship. The student ministry, consisting of students in sixth through twelfth grades, has a weekly Sunday school attendance of 60 students. In comparison to the other churches in the area, MBBC is a medium sized church. Located in the middle of a neighborhood, MBBC primarily reaches those within the same ZIP Code as the church, which is primarily Caucasian with median household income of \$84,761.<sup>3</sup> The community is a little over ten miles southeast of Birmingham and is an area with influence, with most residents (95%) having at least a

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<sup>3</sup> United States Census Bureau. "American Fact Finder," accessed April 30, 2016, [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk)

high school diploma.<sup>4</sup> As a part of the Bible belt, the community would consider themselves to be Christian by religious affiliation, yet many times the claimed Christian belief is marginal at best. MBBC has been seeking to minister the gospel in this community for 31 years.<sup>5</sup>

Meadow Brook Baptist Church has had a student ministry since 1984,<sup>6</sup> which began as a Sunday school class for youth, which then led to a Sunday evening youth discipleship program and various youth activities run by a youth committee of volunteers.<sup>7</sup> In 1993,<sup>8</sup> the student ministry grew to have its first full-time youth minister. The current Student Minister has been on staff since August 2013. The student ministry's current mission statement reads "At Engage Student Ministries at Meadow Brook Baptist Church, we seek to minister to 6th-12th grade students in a way that encourages them to engage the gospel, engage in community, and engage in mission." The core values of the student ministry (gospel, community, and mission) correspond to the core values of MBBC (know, grow, and go).<sup>9</sup> Practically, engaging the gospel is teaching the message of the storyline of scripture (creation, fall, redemption, and restoration) to students in a way that it stands as the center of biblical teaching. This central message is taught primarily through teaching in student Sunday school classes, small groups, and our Wednesday night student worship service. Engaging in community is accomplished by

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<sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau. "American Fact Finder," accessed April 30, 2016, [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk)

<sup>5</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention. "Meadow Brook Baptist Church," accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.sbc.net/church/8384-35242/meadow-brook-baptist-church>

<sup>6</sup> Lee N. Allen, *From Many Streams: Meadow Brook Baptist Church, 1981-1985*. Revised and enlarged 1986. Birmingham, Alabama: Meadow Brook Baptist Church, 1986, 9.

<sup>7</sup> "Meadow Brook Baptist Church: 1981-2005," Birmingham, Alabama: Meadow Brook Baptist Church, 2005, 3

<sup>8</sup> "Meadow Brook Baptist Church: 1981-2005," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Meadow Brook Baptist Church. "Mission/Values," accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.meadowbrookbaptist.org/about/missionvalues/>

seeking to connect students relationally to each other. Opportunities for these relational connections come through Sunday school and small groups as well as activity-based events focused on students building relationships. Engaging in mission is helping students to see that God has a plan to use them in His kingdom work wherever He has them. This is done first and foremost by embracing a mindset shift where students begin to understand that God is at work in the world and wants to use them in His mission. Then, students are equipped and challenged to live out their faith and have spiritual conversations in the middle of everyday life. Engaging in mission is expanded through intentional mission experiences where students get to observe, engage, and experience God's work in different parts of the community and world. This could be anything from a day partnering with a local homeless shelter to going to another country to minister alongside a local church. These three values - gospel, community, and mission - form the foundation of a student's spiritual development while in the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church.

The current students at Meadow Brook Baptist Church tend to live in homes where both parents live in the home. The majority of students who attend MBBC come to church alongside both parents, and many of the students have been in the church since birth. In most cases, this creates an environment where parents place a high value on their own children's spiritual development. Though many parents would agree with the priority they should place on a student's spiritual development, they would likely see this development as the role of the church and as something they would leave up to professionals. Since the church is in an affluent culture, many parents hire professionals (tutors, private lesson coaches, and other experts) to help coach and develop students in

the areas where parents feel deficiencies in developing their own child. Parents need to be encouraged that their voice and influence in the life of their children is much stronger and more powerful than they realize, as the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) notes “parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their teenage children, even though they may not realize it.”<sup>10</sup> Parents also need to be better equipped to engage in spiritual conversations with their students.

Many of the graduating students from MBBC go on to attend college. As a whole, this is the cultural expectation of the Meadow Brook community regarding students graduating high school. Many high school graduates go on to attend state schools, and within that state school, the engagement with a local church varies. In my time serving at MBBC, I have observed that about half of the students who have graduated in the last few years remained connected into church throughout their time in college. Obviously, this is a grave concern, but it appears to represent a lower rate of post-graduation church non-attendance than we see in broader national figures. Still, it’s a serious concern that needs to be addressed and this project hopes to provide a framework on how to more effectively help students to see God as One who is at work in their own spiritual journey - a spiritual journey that does not end when a student no longer lives under their parent’s roof.

Though in the same zip code as MBBC, the secondary research group from Inverness Vineyard Church (IVC) has some significant differences. As MBBC is a neighborhood church, IVC is a regional church with students in the student ministry representing 14 different school systems some of which are up to 30 miles away from the

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56.

church. IVC serves as a regional church because it is the only church in the Association of Vineyard Churches in the Birmingham metro area. IVC is also a smaller congregation than MBBC with a weekly average church worship attendance of 217 and an average weekly attendance in student ministry of 35. The church has a staff team of 5 full time pastors (senior pastor, executive/worship pastor, youth pastor, children's pastor, and administrative pastor) and one part time staff member who helps with children and the cafe ministry. IVC was founded in 1993 as a church plant of Vineyard Christian Fellowship Birmingham, a church that is no longer in existence. IVC began their student ministry in 1996, and they have had 6 youth pastors since then. Jason Richardson, the current youth minister has been serving with the students at IVC for 8.5 years. IVC is more diverse racially as a church than MBBC with 75% of the members being white, 13% bi-racial, 6% black, 4% Hispanic, and 2% Asian.

The student ministry at IVC goes by the name "Counter Culture," and it does not have a specific mission statement but rather adopts the mission statement of the church itself. IVC's mission statement is "loving God, sharing God's love, and introducing people to Jesus." After graduation, approximately 50% of the students from IVC will attend college, of those students 10% will choose a Christian college, 20% will attend a vocational/trade school and be in the workforce within a year, and 30% will enter the workforce immediately after graduation from high school.

### **Problems that Must Be Addressed:**

#### **Finding Faith in the Midst of Identity Formation**

The teenage years are a time of intense personal crisis and a search for identity formation. The questions of "Who am I?," "Where do I fit in?," and "What matters to

me?” haunt the minds of many teenagers. These questions lead many students to deep longings:

Who am I? Where do I fit? What difference do I make? The first is a question about identity, meaning a young person’s conception and expression of who they are. This question holds up the mirror and scrutinizes me. The second is a question of belonging, or a young person’s quantity and quality of life-giving relationships. This question looks around the room, eager to explore us. The third is a question about purpose, or a young person’s commitment to and ability to engage in meaningful activities that impact others. This question peers out the window and wonders about the world.<sup>11</sup>

Many “adolescents will change their clothing, hairstyles, religious preferences, and social cliques in an attempt to find a place where they fit.”<sup>12</sup> In reflecting on the development of adolescents, Chap Clark notes “as we grow up our identity is shaped by the interaction between those voices and messages we receive and our internal conception of ourselves.”<sup>13</sup> This search for identity also contains a clear spiritual component. For many teenagers who have been raised in a church environment or a Christian family, their faith experiences are shaped in their younger years by their parents’ personal faith experiences. For many children, Christianity is simply a cultural and environmental factor like manners, family traditions, and shared experiences that help define their childhood. In reflecting on the parents’ role in helping their children own their own faith, Gordon T. Smith raises the following caution:

Actually I would question whether a parent can be the critical player in enabling his or her children to come to faith. Obviously parents are tremendously formative and influential; parents set the stage, so to speak,

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<sup>11</sup> Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Bret Stephenson, *From Boys to Men: Spiritual Rites of Passage in an Indulgent Age* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 171.

for the conversion. But when it comes to the actual resolve to appropriate adult faith, it may be necessary for parents to be in the background. The presence of a parent may complicate the most fundamental issue at hand, the need to move out from under one's parents' faith and to appropriate faith for oneself.<sup>14</sup>

As teenagers begin to shift away from parental ideologies and preferences in order to determine their own personal identity, it is important that we understand the role of faith in this shift. The teenager must make the shift from faith being primarily experienced vis-a-vis their parents to becoming a faith that they personally experience. A successful shift could be defined by "first, that it is unequivocally their own faith, and second, that their experience becomes the basis for personal transformation."<sup>15</sup> Though the NSYR found that "the vast majority of teenagers we interviewed, of whatever religion, said very plainly that they simply believe what they were raised to believe; they are merely following in their family's footsteps and that is perfectly fine with them,"<sup>16</sup> it cannot merely be assumed that our children and the students in our ministries will make the same decision because "religion makes a good area in which one can demonstrate that one is different and independent from one's parents and perhaps younger siblings."<sup>17</sup>

In many Christian circles, parents and pastors assume that this transition will happen without any intentionality on their part in helping a teenager make this transition.

As Christian Smith reminds us:

religious congregations and other religious organizations are uniquely positioned in the array of social institutions operating in the United States to embrace youth, to connect with adolescents, to strengthen ties between

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 216.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Smith, *Beginning Well*, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78.



adults and teenagers. This could only be good for all involved. But it will not happen automatically. It will require intentionality and investment.<sup>18</sup>

And Gordon T Smith challenges us:

we do not know how to speak meaningfully about those who are coming to faith. We lack a way to speak about the spiritual identity of children, especially in their teen years, as they move through adolescence and are in the process (often over an extended period of time) of seeking to understand their own identity (differentiation) and to make sense of their parents' faith. We need a language that enables us to speak meaningfully about our children's distinctive journey to faith in Christ, with in their younger years and as they become adolescents or young adults.<sup>19</sup>

Gordon Smith goes on to comment:

This liminal period, a time of rebirth, of coming into one's own life; it is a season of differentiation, when one recognized that one is not merely the child of one's parents but now also a person in one's own right. It is a vulnerable and potentially difficult season of life: separation from parents, differentiation, is never easy - either for the child or the parent. Yet however difficult, it is crucial. The marks of this transition need to be clear for the Christian community.<sup>20</sup>

It is essential that the church become a Christian community where students can grow to experience their own faith and transition into their own identity as a child of God in the context of the community of faith.

### Students Graduating Lacking Faith

In a world where the research is showing that many students never own their own faith identity, it is understood that the passing of faith to the next generation is something that we cannot afford to merely assume. As Kenda Creasy Dean notes, "American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith - but it does not concern them very

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<sup>18</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 264.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 181.

much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.”<sup>21</sup> Intentionality is needed in approaching a process for passing faith on to teenagers. Those teenagers who grew up to not graduate from faith approached “faith as a way of life, not just a system of beliefs - and specifically, as a way of life that practices an ethic of self-giving that reflects Christian views on the nature of God.”<sup>22</sup>

Our goal is to be churches who “help young people develop consequential faith best when they focus, not on who they are - or on who they want young people to be in order to perpetuate their theological brand - but by focusing on who Christ is calling young people to become as he sends them into the world on his behalf.”<sup>23</sup> For students, faith must become something that is real and makes a difference in their lives. As the NSYR study reveals,

The point is simply that understanding and embracing the right religious faith and belief according to their religions does not appear to be a priority in the lives of most U. S. adolescents - and perhaps many of their parents. Faith is usually just there, around somewhere, and most teens do believe something religious or other. But religion simply doesn’t seem consequential enough to most teenagers to pay close attention to and get right. Rather, most teens seem content to live with a low-visibility religion that operates somewhere in the mental background of their lives.<sup>24</sup>

We must teach and disciple students into living a faith that is real and makes a difference in their lives and then leads them to make a difference in the world.

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<sup>21</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling The American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 195.

<sup>24</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 137.

## Testimony as a Single Decision

In many evangelical churches, our modern-day entrance into the faith, is a point of personal salvation. Whether you walk an aisle, pray a prayer, or make a public profession of faith, this is a defining moment in a child's spiritual development. However, the problem with a single defining moment is what happens to a child when they question their faith in their teenage years? As Gordon T. Smith explains

The language of salvation and volition (or surrender) is all wrapped up in the assumption that conversion is punctiliar. You can date it. You can mark it. You can know when you were saved, because you know the exact moment when you prayed what is typically called 'the sinner's prayer.' Preachers can count conversions, if they have more than one 'decision,' and conversion is linked to this 'decision.' Conversion is punctiliar, and salvation is punctiliar. They are tied to the moment in which one made the decision, said the prayer, and thereby 'accepted Jesus into one's heart.'<sup>25</sup>

David F. Wells notes the lack of a biblical foundation for this practice by stating:

When Jesus issued the Great Commission, he did not tell his followers to go into all the world and ask people to raise their hands or fill out a decision card. Rather, he enjoined them to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything he had commanded. This requires an intensive and sustained investment in the lives of disciples, to the end that every aspect of a person's life is supernaturally converted and reoriented in turning to God.<sup>26</sup>

In reflecting on this practice in the church, A. W. Tozer warns:

today all is made to depend on an initial act of believing. At a given moment a 'decision' is made for Christ, and after that everything is automatic...In our eagerness to make converts we allow our hearers to absorb the idea that they can deal with their entire responsibility once and for all by an act of believing. This is in some vague way supposed to honor grace and glorify God, whereas actually it is to make Christ the author of a grotesque, unworkable system that has no counterpart in the Scriptures of truth.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Reclaiming Christian Conversion as Unique, Necessary, and Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 10.

<sup>27</sup> A. W. Tozer, "Faith Is a Journey, Not a Destination," *The Alliance Weekly* 92, no. 45 (1957): 2. Quoted in Gordon Smith, *Beginning Well*, 25.

In also recognizing this shift in a practical definition of salvation in the church, Dallas

Willard laments

Why is it that we look upon our salvation as a moment that began our religious life instead of a daily life we receive from God? We're encouraged somehow today to remove the essence of faith from the particulars of daily human life and relocate it in special times, places, and states of mind.<sup>28</sup>

This is a dangerous shift, yet "we have become so used to this style of life, we are hardly aware of it."<sup>29</sup>

If they turn away from God and turn back to God are they becoming saved again?

In many youth ministries, students recommit their lives to Jesus over and over again every time they have yet another bout with a persistent sin or every time they give into peer pressure. Yet, "conversion...is rarely if ever a single, defining moment at which we can state definitively that a person had fully converted and is truly 'in' (or out)."<sup>30</sup> The solution to this struggle is to teach students that faith in and of itself is a journey of seeking to follow God. J. D. Greear explains that:

Salvation does indeed happen in a moment, and once you are saved you are always saved. The mark, however, of someone who is saved is that they maintain their confession of faith until the end of their lives. Salvation is not a prayer you pray in a one-time ceremony and then move on from; salvation is a posture of repentance and faith that you begin in a moment and maintain for the rest of your life.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to this application in student ministry, Ben Trueblood comments

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<sup>28</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1988), 28.

<sup>29</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon Smith, *Beginning Well*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2013), 5.

There is a conversion moment as well as a continued discipleship element. It's true that you can't have the discipleship element if there's no conversion. However, student ministry will be dysfunctional if event after event produces spiritual orphans who don't understand what to do next and have no where to go. Student pastors and leaders, your job isn't finished at the moment of a decision.<sup>32</sup>

In echoing Trueblood's concern, Duffy Robbins writes

So much of our youth ministry effort is focused on helping young people to 'become Christians' that we've lost sight of our central God-given mandate to build them into disciples, 'baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19-20). Surveys of church young people indicate that we're doing a better job getting them to show up then helping them to grow up.<sup>33</sup>

This journey in many believers' lives looks more like a roller coaster ride of ups and downs than a gradual climbing of a mountain of a gradual ascent. As J. I. Packer describes:

Conversion itself is a process. It can be spoken of as a single act of turning in the same way that consuming several dishes and drinks can be spoken of as a single act of dining, ...and revivalism encourages us to think of a simple, all-embracing, momentary crisis as its standard form. But conversion...is best understood if viewed as a complex process that for adults ordinarily involved the following: thinking and re-thinking; doubting and overcoming doubts, soul-searching and self-admonition; struggle against feelings of guilt and shame; and concern as to what realistic following of Christ might mean.<sup>34</sup>

Helping students to understand and articulate their own personal journey of faith through a testimony<sup>35</sup> allows them to have a personal faith narrative on which to rest their

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<sup>32</sup> Ben Trueblood, *Student Ministry that Matters: 3 Elements of a Healthy Student Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples: A Small Book About a Big Idea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2011), 19-20.

<sup>34</sup> J. I. Packer, "The Means of Conversion," *Crux* 25, no. 4 (1989): 14-22. Quoted in Gordon Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Testimony, for the purposes of this thesis-project, is the story of the ongoing work of God in the life of a follower of Jesus from the moment of salvation through the process of sanctification.

security when times of doubt and challenges to their faith arise. Testimony is so important because it “draws on our experience- not every experience...but ‘what happens when God meets us, right smack in the middle of our lives.’ Testimony tells about a time when, by the sheer force of grace, God’s story and our story collided.”<sup>36</sup> “One of the traits of the evangelical spiritual and theological tradition is the recognition of the value of spiritual autobiography.”<sup>37</sup> In reflecting on the possible impact and formative value of the practice of testimonies or spiritual biographies, Gordon Smith notes that “Hindmarsh observes that conversion narratives did not merely reflect experience; they also defined it and thereby strengthened it - giving meaning and clarity, confirming the contours and elements of an experience, establishing identity.”<sup>38</sup>

### Rites of Passage as Tools for Faith Formation

In many cultures, we see rites of passages. Whether that rite of passage be a sweet sixteen birthday party for a teenage girl in the United States or a manhood ceremony in the African jungle, these are experiential moments that help children define their identity.

As Bret Stephenson explains:

Rites of passage were key for survival in our human history. Rites of passage helped ensure the growth of teens into healthy adults, and prepared each generation of adults to fulfill their role in keeping the community vibrant and growing. The adults in a village or community were very deliberate in their efforts to mold adolescent boys into healthy men. All older cultures learned that if you leave adolescent boys to fend for themselves, they often take the wrong path. They need to be led through adolescence and put in a position that begins with a boy but requires a man for completion, thus encouraging the youth to grow up quickly yet solidly. Native cultures kept adolescence as short as possible,

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<sup>36</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 157.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 157.

for it drove everyone crazy. Modern American adolescence is now the longest in history, with no end point and a steadily earlier starting point.<sup>39</sup>

As children become adults, rites of passages confirm the character and status of the child and help aide them in their identity formation. In reflecting on these rites of passage,

Chap Clark comments:

Once a child had completed the rituals, rites of passage, and training experiences necessary to be accepted into interdependent relationships within the adult community, he or she was fully assimilated as an adult member of that community. This process, called the rite of passage by Arnold van Gennep in 1908, had three elements: separation from the old status; transition, usually with a specified ritual; and incorporation into the adult community. For over a century, formalized process of incorporating the young into adulthood have been devalued, especially in the United States.<sup>40</sup>

Maybe it is time for the church to go back to these ancient rituals as a framework for creating our own frameworks which involve passing faith on to the next generation.

“Ceremonies and rituals became mainstays of organized societies because they had tangible, measurable benefit for the community.”<sup>41</sup> Embracing these rites of passage will help students in forming their own faith as well as helping the Christian community to develop a greater understanding of their own spiritual journeys and faith development. This project is a step in the process of once again creating frameworks through which the Holy Spirit can help students to own their own faith while being deeply encouraged and guided by the faith experience of their parents and other saints who have gone before them.

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<sup>39</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 33.

## **Methodology and Parameters of the Project**

The goal of this project is to help students within the context of the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church and Inverness Vineyard Church to gain a greater experience of being able to articulate their faith through a “This Is My Story” sermon series and a rite of passage “Sharing Your Story” for our high school seniors. Through these ministry focuses, students will begin to understand that their testimony is the ongoing work of God in their life rather than a single experience with God.

Through the “This Is My Story” sermon series, students will be challenged to understand God as One who is at work in their lives and in the world through a biblical foundation to set up the series. Students will then be challenged by the life-stories of God working in the lives of men and women in our church and in our community. Students will be surveyed at the beginning and the end of the series to see how their own understanding of God’s work in their own lives had changed. Students will then participate in a one-on-one interview with an outside researcher through which the students will further explore their own story by sharing it with the outside researcher.

Through the “Sharing Your Story” rite of passage experience, our high school seniors at Meadow Brook Baptist will be taught by using the framework of the gospel (creation, fall, redemption, and restoration) to see their own spiritual journeys as mirroring the cosmic story of redemption made clear in the story of the gospel. Students will then be walked through processing the beginnings of faith experience in their lives (creation), the role of struggle in their journey of faith (fall), the work that they have seen God do in their own spiritual journey (redemption), and how they have seen God use them to be a part of the restoration of the world (restoration). The high school seniors will see how their own personal stories point to the greater cosmic story of redemption. The



rite of passage will culminate with the high school seniors sharing with the other students in the youth group about their own spiritual journeys and what God has taught them through this intentional discipleship process. The students who participate in the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process will also have a follow-up interview after their first semester of college to see how their faith foundation and story of faith helped to influence their lifestyle and decisions.

The resources from the “This Is My Story” series and the “Sharing Your Story” rite of passage will be developed and shared as a resource for other churches as they seek to more effectively pass faith on to the next generation by helping students to understand God’s ongoing work in and through their lives for His glory and their good.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Seeking to help teenagers form their own faith by identifying spiritual markers in their spiritual journeys and helping them to understand their testimony as an ongoing work of God in their lives is a task that requires a clear biblical and theological foundation. These foundations shape our understanding of the Old Testament command in Deuteronomy 6 and the role it plays in passing the faith to the next generation. Likewise, our understanding of conversion and sanctification and the importance of rites of passages will need to be informed by biblical and theological foundations. The progression from the Old Testament law, to the defining of God's work in one's life, to the practical examples of faith shown through selected biblical narratives will move the biblical foundations from command to process through the natural examples of application given within the text. This foundation naturally moves the discussion from a clear understanding of orthodoxy then expressed in several examples of that belief being lived out in real life.

## **The *Shema* and the Command to Pass on Faith**

At the heart of the Mosaic law<sup>1</sup> stands the *Shema*<sup>2</sup> in Deuteronomy 6:7-9. This is a passage that outlines the command for the passing on of the faith to the next generation stating:

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate question raised by this passage is to whom this is directed: who is involved in the word “you?” Does “you” simply refer to parents, or does “you” refer to the entire community of faith? From the context of the passage, it is likely that the child’s parents are the first audience of the command. The parents are the ones who are likely sitting in the house with their children, walking along the way with their children, and tucking them into bed. The parents have a defined role in the faithful and daily passing on of faith to their children. In reflecting on this opportunity for parents to pass on faith to

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<sup>1</sup> This section of Deuteronomy is considered “the pivot around which everything else in Deuteronomy revolves” (Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990], 97). It could be considered “the formulaic statement that has become the central confession of faith in Judaism” (Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary [Macon: Smith and Helwys, 2003], 124) or the “fundamental monotheistic dogma of the Old Testament” (Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976], 169). The significance of this passage is also seen in that “it became the centerpiece of Jewish family worship” (Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 76). The previous passage of Deuteronomy 6:5 was quoted by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament law in Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29, and Luke 10:27. The focus passage of Deuteronomy 6:7-9 follows as the way that the people of Israel were to pass on their own covenantal faithfulness to God to the generations to come.

<sup>2</sup> This was a term used by the Jews to describe this passage “after the first word of v.4, the imperative of the verb *sama*, ‘to hear’, ‘To hear,’ in Hebrew lexicography, is tantamount to ‘to obey,’ especially in covenant contexts such as this” (Eugene H. Merrill, *Volume 4 Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary. [Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994], 162).

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Bible English Standard Version, (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001). All Bible quotations will be from the English Standard Version unless noted.

their children, Robert Coleman notes that “the greatest opportunity for ministry comes in the day-by-day witnessing in the home and at work, where personal relationships are virtually automatic.”<sup>4</sup> Through this discipleship model, “relationships become the structure on which instruction, discipleship, and growth can occur.”<sup>5</sup>

But, there is also a secondary relational audience for this command. In reflecting on how we often misinterpret this passage as God’s word to parents, April Diaz notes:

yet we do often misinterpret this passage as God’s word to parents. The Lord wasn’t exclusively instructing parents to do this for their children. He was calling forth the entire community - ‘all y’all’ - to raise up the younger generation. It would require a the entire village, all of the Israelites, to ensure that the next generation would know the great ‘I AM.’<sup>6</sup>

Since the communal aspect of passing on faith has been established, the command goes on to call parents alongside the community of faith to be “diligent”<sup>7</sup> in teaching plan and strategy. Eugene Merrill described this process as impressing “the words of the covenant faith into the thinking of his children by inscribing them there with indelible sharpness and precision.”<sup>8</sup> Merrill goes on to describe the imagery of this process: “The image is that of the engraver of a monument who takes a hammer and a chisel in hand and with painstaking care etches a text into the face of a solid slab of granite. The sheer labor of such a task is daunting indeed, but once done the message is there to stay.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1987), 129.

<sup>5</sup> Ron Hunter, “The D6 View of Youth Ministry” in *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 152.

<sup>6</sup> April L. Diaz, “A Call to Adoption: Integration of Youth Ministry to the Church,” in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 342.

<sup>7</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:7.

<sup>8</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 167

<sup>9</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 167.

From the *Shema*, a child's training and formation in the faith is something that cannot merely be done haphazardly. The truths about God and His work are the most important truths that can be taught to children. The pattern of everyday exposure to the truths of God as commanded in the *Shema* is a daily passage of faith to the next generation. This approach consists of everyday conversations. As a parent and child live life together, how can they look for teachable moments when they can pass on the faith to their kids? As the community of the church comes alongside parents, how can they look to also pass on their own faith experiences to help reinforce what the parents are seeking to teach at home? This strategy also includes writing scriptures and biblical truths where children will be exposed to them on a daily basis. The picture of faith formation in the *Shema* is being surrounded by the written Word while being constantly exhorted by the spoken Word. The family that seeks to follow this model cannot help but have a home that is saturated in the truth where children will see that the truths of the scripture inform, describe, and help one navigate everyday life. This teaching of the faith at home will also be reinforced while the children join in with the worship and discipleship found in their local church. As Gary Parrett and Steve Kang remind us "it takes the whole community of faith to raise the children of that community in the faith."<sup>10</sup>

### **A Biblical Understanding Conversion**

When considering God's work in and through the life of a believer, the theological topics of conversion and sanctification work together to help describe God's work. Conversion can be defined as "our willing response to the gospel call, in which we

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<sup>10</sup> Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 152.

sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.”<sup>11</sup> Grudem offers a further clarification of this definition by stating “the word conversion itself means ‘turning’ - here it represents a spiritual turn, a turning from sin to Christ. The turning from sin is called repentance, and the turning to Christ is called faith.”<sup>12</sup> J. D. Greear explains the nature of repentance and belief in conversion that “repentance and belief are, biblically speaking, parts of the same whole. They are two dimensions of the same thing, two sides of the same coin.”<sup>13</sup> In reflecting on the work of conversion in the life of the Christian, Gordon T. Smith comments:

First, as a fundamental working principle, conversion is a response to the saving initiative of God...Second, it is focused on Christ Jesus: to become a Christian is to believe in Christ Jesus, to trust in Jesus, to become a disciple of Christ, a follower of Christ...Third, it is an act of faith - or indeed, multiple acts of faith, multiple ways in which faith finds expression and is bred into our bones and becomes the very fabric of our way of being and living. And fourth, the act of conversion is never meritorious; it earns nothing.<sup>14</sup>

David F. Wells notes that “the New Testament writers view conversion dynamically - as something someone does - and they interpret it theologically with words such as faith, repentance, grace, forgiveness, and regeneration.”<sup>15</sup> In surveying the use of the words that would be translated “conversion” in the Old and New Testament, Wells states:

The Hebrew verb *shubh* is the closest single-word equivalent for conversion in the Bible. *Shubh* is a common verb that is usually translated by the English “turn” or “return.” It has a wide range of uses. *Shubh* is used one thousand times with no theological meaning. It is used over one hundred times to refer to a spiritual relationship with God, particularly in

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<sup>11</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 709.

<sup>12</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 709.

<sup>13</sup> J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2013), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Reclaiming Christian Conversion as Unique, Necessary, and Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 28.

the context of Israel's covenant with Yahweh... Thus although *shubh* is the closest Hebrew equivalent to our term *conversion*, it is used in a covenantal, not an evangelistic, context in the Old Testament *Shubh* does not focus on a decisive "change of religion" or on a personal, religious transformation through a once-only crisis. Instead *shubh* emphasizes maintaining an existing covenant relationship through continual "turning" from evil to God, a process in which both God and the individual (or more typically the community as a whole) have a part... The New Testament usually uses *epistrepho* as an equivalent for the Old Testament *shubh*... Several New Testament uses of *epistrepho* are derived directly from Old Testament uses of *shubh*. In other cases, *epistrepho* refers to a change in the life of a disciple: accepting the revolutionary values of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3, using *strepho* rather than *epistrepho*), Peter's return after his failure (Luke 22:32), and a Christian's action in "bringing back" an erring fellow Christian (James 5:19-20). In its other New Testament occurrences, *epistrepho* refers to what we currently mean by conversion - non-Christians becoming Christians (with reference to Jews: Acts 3:19; 9:35; 2 Cor. 3:16; with reference to Gentiles: Acts 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9; in Acts 16:20 both Jews and Gentiles are explicitly mentioned).<sup>16</sup>

Thus, conversion is a turning to God in faith from sin and worshipping other gods, yet the Christian's journey continues into the ongoing growth process of sanctification.

### **A Biblical Understanding Sanctification**

Conversion is the initial turn from sin to faith in Christ, but the process of becoming like Christ does not stop there. The life-long process of growth in grace is sanctification. According to Grudem, sanctification is "a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives."<sup>17</sup> As David Watson notes "the call by Jesus was also a call to Jesus."<sup>18</sup> The call to sanctification is the call to live a life of a disciple as Christians walk with Jesus in everyday life. In seeking to define discipleship, Richard Longenecker notes simply that

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<sup>16</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 31-34.

<sup>17</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 746.

<sup>18</sup> David Watson, *Discipleship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 22.

“discipleship...means following Jesus, with the story of Jesus serving as the paradigm.”<sup>19</sup>

He goes on to explain that “discipleship, therefore, included a whole complex of terms, all of which mean much the same thing: keeping Jesus’ word, obeying his commandment, and thereby remaining in his love, just as Jesus has also kept the commandments of the Father and remains in his love (John 15:10).”<sup>20</sup> Further, Longenecker notes:

Discipleship, then, when Jesus was on earth, required precisely this: the total abandonment of a previous way of life for those who were called by him to be his disciples, and a ready willingness on their part to go wherever he chose to go. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the term “disciple” never appears in the New Testament outside the Gospels and Acts, where the life and teachings of Jesus are the primary focus of attention, or that the verb “follow,” while used frequently in the Gospels to describe what Jesus’ disciples did in relation to him, is used only twice outside the Gospels for any kind of personal relationship between Jesus and his followers (cf. Rev. 14:4; 19:4).<sup>21</sup>

Michael Wilkins notes one reason for the disappearance of the word “disciple” from the Bible: “by the time of the early church, as recorded in Acts, the term disciple was synonymous with the true believer in Jesus.”<sup>22</sup> This discipleship and sanctification process though it affected the follower’s entire life. Wilkins comments “the relationship between a great thinker or leader and his follower involved a commitment that affected the follower’s entire life. The follower was truly a ‘disciple’ of the leader and was known primarily for the character of the relationship shared with the master.”<sup>23</sup> Sanctification is

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<sup>19</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship*, 165.

<sup>22</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 37.

<sup>23</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 76.



the process of growing to look like Jesus, the Master, and is seen most clearly in the spiritual journeys of others.

### **Conversion and Sanctification Exemplified Through the Book of Acts**

The theological doctrines of conversion and sanctification are most clearly illustrated in the book of Acts. Throughout the book of Acts, we watch the development of the early church. As the church spreads from the twelve disciples to Rome, the center of the world at the time, we see many people beginning their own faith journeys.

After the first recorded sermon in Acts, Peter's hearers are "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37) and asked "what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter's response is simple and clear: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). In responding to the gospel and beginning a faith journey, these believers are told to repent (μετανοέω). "Repentance (*metanoia*, 'change of mind') involves a turning with contrition from sin to God; the repentant sinner is in the proper condition to accept the divine forgiveness."<sup>24</sup> These new believers are then to be baptized as a public display of their identification with Jesus. Once they repent and come to Jesus, these new Christians will then know they are believers because the Holy Spirit will come and fill them. He will be the one to lead them and guide them. The idea of a changed life in response to conversion is all over this passage. To repent at its core is to change. Baptism serves as a picture of change, and the Holy Spirit works out the changed life in the believer as they begin their journey of faith. This text shows that belief in Jesus and a Christian testimony cannot be merely defined as a past action performed in the life of a believer. Rather, it is an ongoing work of God

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<sup>24</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*. (London: Tyndale, 1952), 97.

through the Holy Spirit in a person's life leading them in a new direction of following God. This idea of repentance is also seen in Peter's sermon on Solomon's Portico where he challenges his hearers to "repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 4:19). In Acts 6:7, Luke, the author of Acts, describes how the church is growing and describes these new believers as becoming "obedient to the faith."

The first person we see coming to faith in Acts is Simon the Magician in Acts 8. Simon was a pagan man who was into magic (Acts 8:9). He was respected in his community and people were amazed at the great magical tricks he would perform (Acts 8:10-11). Simon believed the gospel that Phillip shared with him and was baptized and then travelled with Phillip and was amazed at the works that God was doing (Acts 8:12-13). Simon gave up his magic and left his life behind because he had been compelled by the message of the gospel. This message was worth leaving everything else behind so that it might be pursued. Simon's faith journey led him away from a vocation that did not honor God and led him to follow Phillip and become a part of God's work.

The second person coming to faith in Acts is an Ethiopian eunuch. Phillip shares the gospel with him once he finds him reading from Isaiah the prophet (Acts 8:27-35). The Ethiopian man believes the gospel and asks "What prevents me from being baptized" (Acts 8:37). The Ethiopian man responds to the gospel and immediately wants to show his commitment to Jesus by being baptized. The faith decision results in an immediate spiritual marker that will redefine the man's spiritual journey. The Ethiopian man begins the conversation with Phillip as a seeker hoping for answers and leaves the conversation "rejoicing" (Acts 8:39) because of the answer he had found.

In Acts 9, Saul becomes Paul in the life-changing encounter. Saul's faith journey begins as a passionate pursuit of a faith that stands opposed to the gospel that he will one day proclaim. Our first glimpse of Saul in the biblical narrative is when Saul approved the execution of the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1). He stands holding the coats of the people who are stoning Stephen. Luke comments regarding Saul were that he was "ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women committing them to prison" (Acts 8:3). Saul is clearly an opponent of the gospel message, yet even opponents can be changed when they experience the defining moment of a divine encounter of conversion. In Acts 9, Saul has this moment of conversion. As the encounter begins, he is "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

Saul is clearly an opponent of the gospel message, but while on a mission to take down the Christians, he encounters the risen Christ. Jesus calls to him, reveals Himself to him, and strikes him with blindness. This is one defining moment that Saul will never forget and will completely alter his life. As Saul is sent to the home of Ananias for recovery from his temporary blindness, the Lord gives Ananias a picture of the impact that Saul's life will now have: "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

Saul would become Paul, the apostle who wrote the majority of the New Testament, and whose life fulfilled what the Lord had told Ananias. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, Paul speaks of the hardships of his journey of faith by saying:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman  
- with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings,

and often near death. Five times I received at the hand of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is a daily pressure on me from my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul clearly changed his whole life from his moment of encountering the risen Christ. He was completely transformed, and he lived a life of great personal cost in order to take the message that he once persecuted to the world. For Paul, the starting moment of faith flowed into many more consecutive moments of faith.

The gospel message then goes to the Gentiles through the household of Cornelius, who has a vision from God to call for Peter (Acts 10:1-8). When Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, he shares the gospel with them (Acts 10:23-43) and challenges them to "believe" in Jesus (Acts 10:43). Many people believe, begin speaking in tongues, and then are baptized (Acts 10:44-48). These people immediately began to see the work of God in and through their lives and were baptized in order to publicly identify with the Jesus who had changed their lives.

When Lydia comes to faith (Acts 16:14-15), the Lord "opened her heart to pay attention" (Acts 16:14) to the gospel. She responds to the gospel with baptism as a public response to the change in her life. When Paul and Silas find themselves in jail, God uses them to lead a Philippian jailer to faith (Acts 16:25-34). In response to the jailer's request of how to be saved, Paul and Silas responded "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The jailer and his family who believed were then baptized.

Throughout the book of Acts, salvation always comes by faith through believing in Jesus, yet it does not stop with merely an intellectual belief. The beliefs of the people in Acts lead to a changed life. This changed life is usually marked initially by the spiritual marker of baptism. Then, we see the Holy Spirit beginning to lead the life of the believer as he or she begins to walk with Jesus in a new life purpose and direction. True faith changes a person's life forever. Students must see a faith that changes lives and be called to live a compelling faith that also changes their life. Conversion to following Jesus leads to a life of sanctification of walking in his way.

### **Journeys of Faith in the Biblical Narrative and Their Applications to Passing on Faith**

Throughout the storyline of the Bible, faith is portrayed as a journey from conversion through the life-long process of sanctification. It is full of ups and downs, times of passion and times of apathy, yet through it all, we are being sanctified. Teenagers need to begin to see their faith development not as a single moment of conversion, but an ongoing walk with Jesus. A teenager's testimony would then be seen not as a past historical event that God did in their life at a point of conversion but an ever-unfolding story of God making them more like Him and using them to be His instruments of redemption on the planet. They will then discover who they truly are as they find their identity in Christ and let Him transform them to become the person He is making them. The examples of faithful living found in the following biblical narratives help the *Shema's* command to pass faith onto the next generation and the growth process from conversion into sanctification to come alive in the context of life in the real world.

## The Faith Journey of Abraham

In the book of Genesis, we see the faith journey of the father of the Jewish faith, Abraham. His journey of faith begins with God's initial call on his life to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Abraham was given an invitation from the Lord to go on a journey that would result in him becoming a great nation, gaining influence, being a blessing to the nations, and being blessed with land. Commentator John Skinner suggests that:

there is an intentional pathos in the lingering description of the things he is to leave: thy land, thy kindred, and thy father's house; and a corresponding significance in the vagueness with which the goal is indicated: to a land which I will show thee. Obedience under such conditions marks Abram as the hero of faith.<sup>25</sup>

This journey of faith began with his simple decision to obey God, leave everything behind, and follow the unknown path that God himself would lay before him. This defining moment of calling completely altered Abraham's life, future, and direction. This was not merely a one-time event that had no effect on his life. This moment redefined his entire life. This is also a moment that defines the entire life of the Christian because Abraham's call to follow God in faith was "the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truths, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of all biblical history."<sup>26</sup>

In a sermon on this passage, Saint Augustine remarked:

The right thing to do, brothers and sisters, is to believe God before he pays up anything, because just as he could not possibly lie, so he cannot deceive. For he is God. That's how our ancestors believed him. That's how Abraham believed him. There's a faith for you that really deserves to be admired and made widely known.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Skinner, *Genesis*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 243.

<sup>26</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Sheridan, *Old Testament II: Genesis 12-50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 2.

The following table outlines the highlights of Abraham's journey of faith:

**Table 1. Abraham's Journey of Faith**

<u>Faithful Moments</u>	<u>Moments of Failure</u>
Initial Following- Genesis 12:1-4 Best Land to Lot- Genesis 13:1-18 Prayer for Sodom- Genesis 18:22-33 Sacrifice of Isaac- Genesis 22:1-24 God's Provision of Isaac's Wife- Genesis 24:1-67	Lying to Pharaoh About Sarah Being His Sister- Genesis 12:10-20 Relationship with Hagar- Genesis 16:1-16 Lying to Abimelech About Sarah Being His Sister- Genesis 20:10-18

Though Abraham's spiritual journey was one of ups and downs and successes and failures, Paul described Abraham as a "forefather" for our faith (Romans 4:1). In summarizing Abraham's great journey of faith, Paul states that "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3). Throughout Abraham's faith journey, God was molding him into a man that was righteous before God. Despite his moments of great faith and moments of little faith, God was working righteousness in him. Faith for Abraham began with an initial call, but it did not stop at that defining moment. Rather, it was the first step of faith on a journey of many steps of faith, with some steps forward and some steps back, yet God was sovereignly working His righteousness in Abraham as He molded him into the great forefather of faith.

#### Jacob's Encounter with God

Jacob came from a family of strong faith. His grandfather, Abraham, displayed a life of great faith. His father was Isaac, the son who was willing to be faithfully laid down on the altar to be sacrificed as an offering to God. It was Abraham's faith that led him and Isaac to the altar, but it was Isaac's faith in God and his father that led him to lay

himself down. In this household of great faith, how could Jacob not embrace faith by simply looking at the generations who stood before him? However, Jacob did not truly experience the greatness of God and the power of faith until he experienced God for himself.

On the night of his encounter with God, Jacob finds himself alone. As he rests for the night to take a break from his journey, he has a dream in which he experiences God in a way that will forever define his relationship with God. The dream begins with an image of a ladder to heaven with angels climbing up and down it, and the Lord was standing above the ladder (Genesis 28:12-13). The Lord then spoke to Jacob. The Lord began by reminding Jacob of his heritage of faith from his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac (Genesis 28:13). Jacob was then promised that he would have a great number of children that would inherit the land (Genesis 28:13-14). Jacob's descendants would then be used, like Abraham's descended before him, to be a tool of God's blessing to all of the nations of the world (Genesis 38:14). The Lord then promises Jacob that He will be with Him, guide him, and fulfill His promise to Jacob (Genesis 28:15). Once Jacob awakes from his dream, he knew that something supernatural had happened. He remarked "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it" (Genesis 28:16). He also describes the place as "the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). Gordon Wenham describes the importance of this moment in Jacob's life by stating: "For Jacob, this was his first personal encounter with God; he knew his parents' faith and of their own religious experiences, but now for the first time he has come face to face with God, and he is scared and overwhelmed."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 226.



Jacob encounters God for himself. This experience is a “spiritual milestone”<sup>29</sup> for Jacob. Once Jacob experiences this encounter with God, Jacob takes the stone on which he had laid his head and uses it as a marker stone to remember the place where he personally encountered God and renames the place Bethel (Genesis 28:18-19). Chrysostom notes “since he had been granted wonderful favors by way of the vision, (Jacob) wished to make the place memorable by a name and to keep the memory fresh for future ages.”<sup>30</sup> He also made a commitment that if the Lord would be with him, Jacob would follow Him all of his days and would one day build a house for the Lord in that place (Genesis 28:20-22). This personal encounter with God was marked by a physical reminder and a spiritual commitment.

### The Faith Struggle of Naomi and the Impact on Ruth

The faith journey of Naomi is one of struggle, tribulation, and doubts in the goodness of God. Yet this faith, though not always strong, made a huge impact on her daughter in law, Ruth. Naomi’s story begins with a famine driving Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and her two sons, Mahlon and Chilean, into a foreign land in search of food (Ruth 1:1-2). This foreign land was called Moab and was inhabited by the Moabite people of whom the Israelites considered their “enemy throughout history.”<sup>31</sup> Moving to this foreign land was traumatic in and of itself, but as soon as Naomi’s family arrived in this strange land, her husband, Elimelech, died (Ruth 1:3). This turn in Naomi’s faith journey leaves her seeking to follow her God in a pagan land without a husband to lead

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<sup>29</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 219.

<sup>30</sup> Sheridan, *Genesis 12-50*, 192.

<sup>31</sup> Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 87.

and guide her. As her sons get older and begin to marry, the situation only gets worse. If the family still lived in their homeland of Bethlehem, her sons would have married women that shared their heritage of faith, but because they are in a foreign land, her sons married pagan women (Ruth 1:4).

In the passing on of faith to the next generation, one would think that Naomi's children would be hindered by marrying pagan women who practiced a different religion. In the New Testament, Paul would warn the church at Corinth to "not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). Despite this great loss, God chose to use Naomi's faith and the compelling display of faith that she showed despite her own doubts to make a large impact on Ruth.

As Naomi's story continues, tragedy once again strikes. Ten years after her sons have married, Naomi's sons both die (Ruth 1:5). Naomi is left alone without any of the men in her life to help support her. She decides that she will simply return home to Bethlehem with hope that the rumors that she had heard of the relief from the famine were true (Ruth 1:6-7). She then encourages her daughter in laws to stay in Moab as she returns stating "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband" (Ruth 1:8-9). Ruth and Orpah then have a debate regarding whether to go or not to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:10-15). Of the two daughters in law, Orpah returns to her home while Ruth "clung to her" (Ruth 1:14), which is a "gesture (that) signaled her commitment to 'abandon' her Moabite roots to remain with Naomi permanently."<sup>32</sup> Then Ruth makes a statement of faith in Naomi's God and commitment

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<sup>32</sup> Hubbard, *Ruth*, 115.

to stay by her side saying “where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1: 16-17). Ruth has been clearly impacted by Naomi’s faith and her God. She is willing to give up everything she owns and “renounce her ethnic and religious roots”<sup>33</sup> in order to follow Naomi and go to the place of her people that seek her God. She has “rejected the god of her native land and chose the living God.”<sup>34</sup> It is not clear whether or not this is a conversion moment for Ruth, yet it:

is better viewed as an affirmation of a transfer of membership from the people of Moab to Israel and of allegiance from Chemosh to Yahweh. How much she knew about the implications of claiming Yahweh as one’s God we do not know. She had been observing Naomi for over a decade, but what we have seen from her in this chapter she is hardly qualified to be a missionary of orthodox Yawistic faith and theology. But this is a start, a noble beginning.<sup>35</sup>

Naomi demonstrates a faith that is real. She maintains faith in God despite tragedies that changed the direction of her life and future plans. Through those times, she doubts God’s goodness even going to the point of stating the following “the hand of the Lord has gone out against me” (Ruth 1:13), “the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty” (Ruth 1:20-21), and “the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me” (Ruth 1:21). Despite these words of doubt, Naomi maintains a posture of faith by going back to Bethlehem hoping that the Lord will provide for her there. This is a compelling faith that

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<sup>33</sup> Hubbard, *Ruth*, 117.

<sup>34</sup> John R. Franke, *Old Testament IV: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 184.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary, Volume 6 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 641.

does not back down from the hardship and challenges of the world, yet a faith that clings to hope even though hope may be difficult to see despite her circumstances. This is a faith that has an impact on Ruth causing her not to return to her former gods in Moab, but to venture to Bethlehem with Naomi following this God in which Naomi trusts.

Throughout Ruth and Naomi's journey in Bethlehem, God proves Himself to be a faithful God who is worthy of the women's trust. He provides them relief from the famine (Ruth 1:22), provision of food (2:8-9), redemption of property (Ruth 4: 1-12), a husband for Ruth (Ruth 4: 13), and a child from Ruth (Ruth 4:13-17) who would be a part of the lineage of David (Ruth 4:, 17 and 22) and therefore the lineage of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). As Naomi modeled great faith to Ruth, Ruth passed on great faith to her offspring bringing the gift of faith to future generations of which the purchaser of our faith, Jesus, would come. Faith journeys come in all different forms and can look like successes and failures, yet through it all, God remains faithful.

#### Isaiah Encounters God

In Isaiah 6, Isaiah encounters God. This is a personal encounter that is unlike many of the encounters in the Bible with God. Isaiah is blessed with a heavenly vision that redefines his life and mission from the point of the vision forward. The vision begins with the picture of the Lord in His throne room, with His robe filling the temple, surrounded by indescribable angels who worship Him, and with a voice of thunder (Isaiah 6: 1-4). As Isaiah sees this amazing sight, he realizes that he is in the presence of holiness, yet he cannot live up to that holiness. He comes to a point of realizing his utter need for redemption as he says "Woe is me! For I am lost" (Isaiah 6:5). In the presence of perfection, the darkness of Isaiah's sins and shortcomings are clearer. He is lost, alone,

helpless, and in need of redemption. In reflecting on this text, John Oswalt remarks “prophetic announcement is not enough. Personal confrontation is necessary.”<sup>36</sup>

God, in His great grace, does not leave Isaiah in this state of utter lostness. He provides redemption. The picture of redemption that is seen in Isaiah 6 is a foreshadowing of the ultimate redemption that Jesus purchased for us on the cross. One of the angels brings a burning coal to Isaiah’s lips and gives a statement of the absolution of his sin by saying “your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:6). Grace comes at the core of Isaiah’s greatest place of brokenness, his lips and his words.

Isaiah’s God encounter ends with a call to action. His experience with God cannot merely stay as a historical event in his life. It must make a difference and redefine the rest of his life. This life redefinition begins with a question coming from the throne “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8). The call is to be on mission for God and to be his representative to people who do not believe in Him. When Isaiah hears the call, he responds with the response that each person makes when he or she takes the message of the gospel to heart and lets it change his or her life: “Here am I! Send me” (Isaiah 6:8). “Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into non-existence by the very holiness of God and having received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God’s service?”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 182.

<sup>37</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 186.

## Paul and Timothy Passing on of Faith

One of the most interesting relationships of faith formation in the New Testament is that of Paul mentoring Timothy in the faith. The relationship between these two early followers of Jesus serves as an example of discipleship, mentoring, and faith formation that can become an example of passing faith to the next generation.

Timothy's journey of faith and discipleship began long before he met Paul. This discipleship journey began in his own family in the context of his home. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of this generational faith by writing: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Timothy 1:5).<sup>38</sup> The "sincere faith," of which Paul writes, is one that is passed on to multiple generations. This multigenerational faith is one that was modeled by Timothy's grandmother Lois who passed it to her daughter Eunice who passed it to her son Timothy. In reflecting on the family discipleship of Timothy, Jay Sedwick comments:

Although we cannot be certain of this, Timothy's father was likely not a believer and perhaps had little to do with Timothy's spiritual development (Acts 16:1). What we do know is that his mother and grandmother clearly provided significant spiritual modeling and nurture, which Timothy relied on throughout his life (2 Timothy 1:5). He was fortunate.<sup>39</sup>

We might wish that 2 Timothy 1:5 offered more elaboration about how this passing on of faith was done. Did these women of faith have intentional conversations

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<sup>38</sup> Some scholars (Brox and Houlden) have suggested that Paul wrote this as a fictional model of how passing faith on to the next generation should look. In response to this fictional claim, I. Howard Marshall notes "there is no good reason here to argue that the picture here is fictitious (*pace* Brox, 226f)...the theory that the whole description is a fiction intended to give an ideal picture of how Christian influence spread over generations (Houlden, 107) is weakened" (I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999], 695.).

<sup>39</sup> Jay Sedwick, "Teaching for Adoptive Ministry," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 306.

with Timothy around the dinner table? Did they have a time of family prayer and devotion in their home? Did they teach a specific discipleship material or study with Timothy? These are all questions that confront us as we seek to pass faith on to the next generation. But, one thing is clear: Lois and Eunice “provided an environment crucial to his conversion and spiritual development.”<sup>40</sup> As Donald Guthrie notes: “The apostle was not only deeply conscious of the powerful home influences that had shaped his own career, but was impressed by the saintly atmosphere of Timothy’s home. Lois and Eunice were perhaps known in the Christian church for their domestic piety.”<sup>41</sup> In further commenting on the passing on of faith from Lois to Eunice to Timothy, W. Hulitt Gloer explains:

Timothy’s faith is in keeping with that of his forebears; in this case, his “grandmother, Lois,” and his “mother, Eunice.” Lois and Eunice are both Greek names, found nowhere else in the New Testament. According to Acts 16:1, Timothy’s father was Greek, but his mother (not named in Acts) was Jewish. If so, it is likely that Lois, Eunice’s mother, was also Jewish. Greek names were not unusual for Diaspora Jews. Timothy’s faith “lived first” in Lois and Eunice (v. 5). “Lived” literally means “to be at home,” indicating the depth and extent to which their faith had become an integral part of their lives. No doubt, Timothy had been deeply impacted by their faith. In Judaism, the family was (and is) the primary locus for passing on the traditions of faith. Indeed they are passed from generation to generation. Timothy’s case makes it clear that both men and women are crucial to the chain of tradition. Now it is Timothy’s turn to pass it on to the people in Ephesus so that they too may have a genuine faith, for Paul is convinced that the faith that lived first in Lois and Eunice now “lives” in Timothy.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Phillip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 454.

<sup>41</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 138.

<sup>42</sup> W. Hulitt Gloer, *1 & 2 Timothy – Titus*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2010), 221.

In seeking to provide this same environment for the fostering of faith in the next generation, we see two truths about this relationship between Timothy and his grandmother and mother that can be used in other approaches to the discipleship of the next generation.

- The first truth we see in Timothy's faith formation is that the passing on of faith is relational. It is in Timothy's relationship with his grandmother and mother that faith was passed on. In the context of relationship, Timothy saw that faith was something that mattered to his grandmother and mother and was also something that should matter to him. Timothy also saw that faith was something that naturally flowed out of the lives of his grandmother and mother. Faith was not something that stood as a secondary part of life, but it was something that defined all of life for them, which was the same approach to faith that Paul called Timothy to emulate.
- The second truth we see in Timothy's faith formation is that the faith displayed by Lois and Eunice was authentic. Paul describes their faith as "sincere" (2 Timothy 1:5). This is an important and essential truth that we must embrace as we seek to pass faith on to the next generation. Lois and Eunice lived an authentic faith, a faith that Timothy seemed to spend the rest of his life developing as he traveled and learned under Paul.

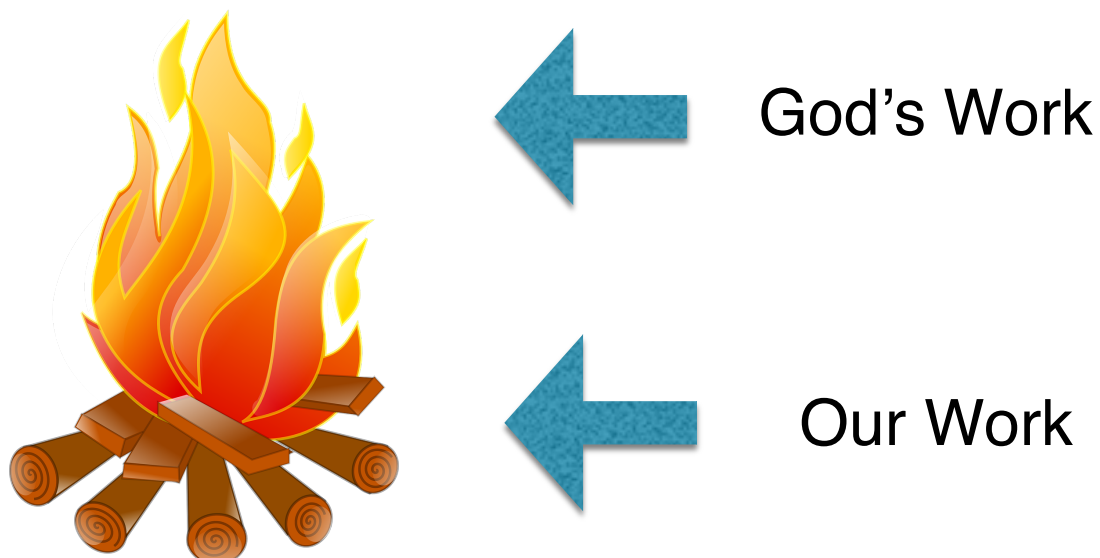
This faith foundation laid by Timothy's mother and grandmother is the same faith that Paul is calling Timothy to emulate and develop. In 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul encourages Timothy to "fan into flame the gift of God." In his heritage of faith, God has blessed Timothy with a great gift. Paul uses the image here of embers of a flame. Timothy's mother and grandmother had laid the embers and starter for the fire of faith that God



would ignite in Timothy. As Timothy sought to continue to grow in discipleship and in his own spiritual journey, Paul called him to fan the flame to let it grow stronger and stronger so that Timothy's light would shine great and strong in the middle of a dark world. Under Paul's faithful mentoring and discipling, Timothy continued to fan the flame that he had been given to become the man of God that he had been created and rescued to become. As Bill Hull explains, "he wanted Timothy to take effective action that would ensure the continuation and health of the gospel in his own life, in the life of the church at Ephesus, and in the larger kingdom."<sup>43</sup>

As parents, teachers, mentors, and youth ministers seek to nurture the next generation, this image of a campfire is helpful.

**Figure 1. God's Work and Our Work in Discipleship.**



The call is to lay the foundation. By teaching, mentorship, and example, leaders and influencers lay the sticks and wood that will form the fuel of the fire. The challenging part is that this is where the role of the adult figure stops. A leader can teach, mentor,

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<sup>43</sup> Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 283.

love, and care as much as one can, and leaders should be personally faithful to do that. The reality, however, is that only the Holy Spirit himself can ignite the flame. Therefore, leaders must earnestly seek God to work in the hearts and lives of students. Those seeking to influence the next generation need to pray that he would light the flame in students' lives to see the beauty of the gospel and the all-consuming call to faithfully follow Jesus. Once the Holy Spirit ignites the flame, leaders must faithfully come alongside and encourage new believers to fan that flame as Paul encouraged Timothy. In a sermon, Matt Chandler explained this process in the following way:

So the best a parent can do...is just kind of gather kindling around their kid and hope the Holy Spirit ignites it. If a kid believes for any other reason, he believes what his parents believe. He doesn't believe for himself or herself. That's not what we want. We want the Holy Spirit of God to open up our kids' souls so they might own their faith. I don't want my kids to own my faith. I want them to have faith. I want them to have trust. I want them to have joy. I want them to have pleasure, and so we're going to do things a certain way, but that doesn't justify my kids.<sup>44</sup>

Through this model of faithful, spirit dependent discipleship, students can see the importance of faith and can be encouraged to live out that faith in a way that is truly compelling to the world around them.

### **Conclusions and Applications**

Throughout both the Old and New Testament, great examples have been seen of passing faith on to the next generation and living out a changed lifestyle after an encounter with God. From the *Shema*, the definitions of conversion and sanctification, and these biblical narratives, some general conclusions and applications can be drawn.

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<sup>44</sup> Matt Chandler, *Galatians: Living to God*, accessed March 11, 2012, <http://thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/detail/living-to-god/>

1. First, passing faith to the next generation requires a strategy that is grounded in speaking the truth and displaying the truth in actions and words. This happens first and foremost through the avenue of personal relationships. Through exposing the next generation to truth on a constant and everyday basis, we show them how scripture is a guide for life and all of the challenges that it brings.
2. Second, faith is not a one-time experience but a journey that begins with a personal encounter with God. Students must truly experience God for themselves. They cannot live on their parents' faith, yet their faith cannot be simply linked to a historical experience in the past. Faith is an ongoing journey of walking with God. This was clearly displayed in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Naomi, Ruth, Isaiah, Paul, Timothy, and the lives of the countless new believers in the book of Acts, whose faith resulted in action and a complete change of their lives.
3. Third, faith must be displayed to the next generation in a way that is authentic. Those seeking to pass faith on to others must be real with them about their own sins, struggles, and doubts. This reminds students that faith truly is a journey of becoming who God is making us to be.
4. Fourth and finally, those seeking to pass faith on to the next generation must set up the logs for the fire, pray that God ignites the fire, and then teach those who are ignited how to fan the flame. Parents, youth pastors, and adults have a very important role to play, but they cannot do it without the work of God in the hearts and lives of students. It is in His work that we rest and in his strength that we seek to passionately, strategically, and relationally pass the life-changing truth of the gospel on to future generations

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to help understand the importance of passing faith on to the next generation and how to best approach developing a rite of passage experience for students, a review of current literature must be explored. The topics explored in this literature review are: a theological approach to the gospel and conversion, the current state of teenage development and youth culture, ideas and strategies for passing on the faith, the role of narrative in testimony and story development, and the foundations of discipleship models. Through the survey of other publications addressing these topics, the foundations of the “This Is My Story” teachings and the “Sharing Our Stories” rite of passage experience are designed.

#### **Theological Approach to the Gospel and Conversion**

When approaching the gospel narrative of the scriptures, faithfully and accurately portraying and communicating the story of redemption is essential to both a student’s understanding of the work of God in his or her world and in his or her own personal lives as well as the ability to articulate his or her own faith narratives to others. The reformational worldview clearly taught through Albert M. Wolters’ *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* is a fundamental resource on framing the gospel narratives and this thesis-project. Throughout the book, Wolters outlines the gospel narrative through the popular lens of creation, fall, and redemption.<sup>1</sup> This narrative approach is often applied merely to a person’s own spiritual state, but Wolters expands

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<sup>1</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 12.

this beyond the spiritual in that “all of creation participates in the drama of man’s fall and ultimate liberation in Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Since the narrative of the fall impacts all of creation, the narrative of redemption will also impact all of creation. In teaching the “This Is My Story” and discipling high school seniors through the “Sharing Our Stories” framework, Wolters’ holistic view of the gospel is presented and used as the framework through which students view their own personal stories. Just as creation points to the beginnings of God’s work in the world, students will look through the lens of creation into the beginnings of the workings of God in their hearts, lives, and stories. Just as the fall shows us the depths of humanity’s own depravity and deep need for God, the students will look at their own trials, sins, and struggles through the lens of the fall. As redemption shows the rescue of Christ, students look to see how God has been at work changing and redeeming their own stories from the first moments of faith to God’s own faithfulness in the ups and downs of life. As the future continuation of redemption (termed “restoration” in this thesis-project) points to a coming day when Jesus makes all things new, students will look and see how God has chosen to use even them in His ongoing story of redemption in the world. The argument of *Creation Regained* can be summarized as “(1) creation is much broader than we tend to think, (2) the fall affects that creation in full extent, and (3) redemption in Jesus Christ reaches just as far as the fall.”<sup>3</sup> It is essential that students understand both the gospel narrative of redemption and the role of their story in God’s ongoing redemption of the world. Wolters comments about this importance:

This spiritual warfare hits many bright Christian students when they make the transition from high school to university or college. Unless they have

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<sup>2</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 86.

an integral biblical worldview that equips them to fight back with the sword of the Spirit, their alternatives are either to live a life of almost intolerable intellectual schizophrenia (the chapel hermeneutically sealed off from the classroom) or to be swept along in the maelstrom of secular humanism.<sup>4</sup>

Ministers, parents, and churches are called to equip students to stand for truth and follow faithfully after Jesus. A strong, personal understanding of the gospel narrative is the key theological foundation for equipping the next generation.

The theological approach to conversion and beginnings of a life long journey with Jesus are foundations that must also be passed on to the next generation. If a faith journey does not begin at a biblical place and have a biblical foundation, it will falter and fail because it lacks a foundation built on truth. In reflecting on this the importance of a strong foundation, J. D. Greear's book *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* is a helpful resource. Greear writes "conversion is not the completing of a ritual, it is commencing a relationship. The assurance of ritual is based on accurate words and memory. The assurance of relationship is based on a present posture of repentance and belief."<sup>5</sup> In many protestant and evangelical contexts, including many churches in the researcher's denomination, conversion gets reduced to a ritual that a person performs that then has no further effect on that individual's life. Greear notes the results of this problem are demonstrated in "a 2011 study [that] shows that nearly half of all adults in America have prayed such a prayer, and subsequently believe they are going to heaven, though many of them rarely, if ever, attend a church, read the Bible personally, or have lifestyles that differ in any significant way from those outside of the church."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2013), 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart*, 6.

This problem results from a lack of a clear biblical teaching on how the Bible defines conversion. “Evangelical shorthand for the gospel is to ‘ask Jesus into your heart.’ or ‘accept Jesus as Lord and Savior,’ or ‘give your heart to Jesus.’ These phrases may not be wrong in themselves, but the Bible never tells us, specifically, to seek salvation in those ways. The biblical summation of a saving response toward Christ is ‘repentance’ and ‘belief’ in the gospel.”<sup>7</sup> Part of the “This Is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” rite of passage is to help students to get through the language of the Christian subculture in order to help gain a true and biblically based understanding of what it means to follow Jesus through conversion and the life of faith to follow. For those who do not remember a specific ritual moment that many modern-day Christians tend to build their faith narrative, Greear offers this encouragement: “At the end of the day, knowing the moment of your conversion is not essential. What is essential is to know that you are currently in a posture of repentance and faith.”<sup>8</sup>

Building on the importance of conversion not being merely transactional and having a biblical foundation, David F. Wells’s work *Turning to God: Reclaiming Conversion as Unique, Necessary, and Supernatural* deepens the conversation also explored by Greear on the nature and process of coming to faith. Wells argues that “conversion does not stand alone; it is the beginning of a lifelong journey of growing in Christ and being conformed into his image. Discipleship must follow on conversion as living and breathing follow birth.”<sup>9</sup> Wells uses the following helpful illustration describing conversion: “the point about conversion, though, is that it is the way into the

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<sup>7</sup> Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Reclaiming Christian Conversion as Unique, Necessary, and Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 23.

Christian faith; it is not the entirety of the Christian faith. Conversion is only the threshold to the building of salvation. We are not called to stand, year in and year out, gazing at the threshold and testifying to it, but to enter the building.”<sup>10</sup> Building on this analogy, Wells comments on how a lack of understanding of this truth effects many churches:

The evangelical world had strangely prevented this truth. Evangelicals often make the test of one’s spiritual life one’s willingness to testify to the moment of birth. Describing one’s sensations in passing through the doorway is considered proof that one is in the room! This shifts the focus from where it ought to be - the evidence of the Spirit’s renewing work in producing a God-centered life, a God-fearing heart, and God-honoring character and witness - and places it on a person’s autobiographical account of the conversion crisis. The only real proof of our conversion is an obedient and fruitful life.<sup>11</sup>

In another helpful example, Wells comments:

Conversion can be spoken of as a single act of turning, just as consuming several dishes and drinks can be spoken of as a single act of drinking. A significant part of the evangelical world encourages us to think of a simple, all-embracing, momentary crisis as the standard form of conversion. But conversion, our turning to God, is better understood if we view it as a complex process. The process involved in thinking and rethinking, doubting and overcoming doubts, soul-searching and self-admonition, struggle against feelings of guilt and shame, and concern as to what a realistic following of Christ might mean, whether or not it culminated in a personal crisis that will afterward be remembered as “the hour I first believed.”<sup>12</sup>

This focus of conversion being a complex process rather than a single moment experience is one of the foundations of the “This Is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” rite of passage experience.

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<sup>10</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 69.



For many students in the study, they grew up within the community of faith and did not have a dramatic conversion experience. In helping believers navigate the differences in a conversion from within the community of faith and a conversion of someone from outside the community of faith, Wells notes:

the difference in conversion stories lies not in what God has done for us in Christ but in our process of turning to him. A child raised in a Christian home may find conversion so natural that he or she cannot pinpoint when this change occurred. For others, however, the transition is difficult, conversion is dramatic, and the consequences in the community may jeopardize the convert's life.<sup>13</sup>

He then goes on to propose some helpful terms in defining the differences in the conversion experiences of those raised in the community of faith and those raised without a foundation of faith:

In terms of the behavioral and psychological dimension, it might be helpful to distinguish between “insider” and “outsider” conversions. “Insider conversion” refers to people who have a substantial set of beliefs before coming to Christ; for example, Jews who believe in the Old Testament, children in Christian homes churchgoers who accept the basic biblical truths but who lack a personal relationship with Christ. “Outsider conversion” refers to people who have little or no prior knowledge of Christianity and who may need to repudiate a large set of beliefs and practices before Christian conversion is possible.<sup>14</sup>

In agreement with this distinction, Gordon T. Smith comments that “we must acknowledge that conversion for first- and second-generation Christians is not the same; it is possible to ‘grow up in the faith.’”<sup>15</sup> The backgrounds approaching the personal narrative of conversion are helpful to encourage students who have grown up around grace and wonder if God truly has brought a great transformation to their lives. This

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<sup>13</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 207.

paradigm and approach proves helpful in guiding students to understand the work of God in their own lives and faith journeys as God's work even though it looks different in different types of people.

In sharing our story of conversion with others, Wells encourages Christians to focus on Jesus' work through the gospel rather than their own work in making a decision to follow Jesus. He comments:

The truth of the gospel is not tied to our testimony to it. It is tied to what God did in Christ reconciling us to himself. Therefore, while we can and should speak about our experience of this, that speaking need to come in a framework that is also apologetic and draws people not to ourselves as those who are forgiven but to Christ through whom that forgiveness is found.<sup>16</sup>

Gordon T. Smith agrees by stating "religious autobiography on first glance may seem very personal. And in a sense, it is. It celebrates the grace of God extended to a particular person. But the hero of the story is God, not the person recounting the narrative."<sup>17</sup> Wells goes on to elaborate about how Christians should present their role in light of God's role in conversion by stating:

For the degree to which the sinner contributes anything to his or her salvation except the sin from which he or she needs to be redeemed is the degree to which that work is not divine. And the degree to which it is not divine is the degree to which it is outside God's saving domain. To add human cooperation to the divine work does not produce a richer salvation but a poorer one, not a deeper work but a shallower one.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the process of discipling and teaching students for this project, students will always be reminded that they were not the main character in the story. Jesus is the hero of

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<sup>16</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, *Turning to God*, 174.

their testimony and faith journey, and as students shared that journey with others, they were encouraged to put the spotlight on the proper hero.

Gordon T. Smith's books *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* and *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* are helpful resources in defining conversion and the importance of biblically defining it and exploring how to apply conversion narratives to ministry.

Regarding exploring one's own conversion narrative, Smith explains:

In my experience of teaching on conversion in both academic settings and within congregational life, one of the most fruitful exercises has been for participants to formulate a conversion narrative that is consistent with their experience, that authenticates it (gives it significance and value) and that then enables that experience to foster a positive focus toward the future to enable continuing transformation.<sup>19</sup>

People are changed as they understand how God has worked in their lives, and as they see that change, they continue to want to grow in that grace they reflect on. Smith goes on to note that conversion narratives allow people "to see and enter into the grand picture of God's work."<sup>20</sup> Understanding a personal conversion story involves great wisdom and discernment as a person seeks to understand how God is taking his or her own personal story and intersecting it with God's great story of redemption. Smith comments:

Conversion, then, is something that one discerns rather than a dramatic and decisive moment. Conversion is recognizing the often subtle ways that God is present and at work in our lives. Rather than placing the locus of God's salvation on our actions - whether a prayer or a response to an "altar call" to any other seemingly decisive moment - conversion must focus on God and his actions. In other words, conversion is about discernment.<sup>21</sup>

He also notes:

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 89.

In the consideration of conversion narratives, it is valuable for each person to consider their own story. We cannot give critical attention to the matter of conversion as “objective” bystanders. We only come to this through our own experience of grace, and in so doing, we grow in self-knowledge, as we see more clearly the character of our own experience and this of our own identity.<sup>22</sup>

The personal spiritual discernment aspect of articulating a conversion narrative leads to the great need of a person to come alongside as a spiritual guide to those seeking to process their own experiences of faith. Smith explains this need by stating “the role of the youth minister, then, should be like a spiritual director, helping the young to interpret and give meaning to what they are experiencing rather than telling them what should be happening in their lives. Most of all, the youth minister, on behalf of the whole church, communicates an unqualified acceptance.”<sup>23</sup> From Smith’s arguments and guidance, the “Sharing Our Stories” rite of passage experience is designed in order to help a student to discern his or her own spiritual journey with the youth minister serving as a spiritual director in that process of personal reflection and self-discovery.

Smith also echoes Wells’ thoughts on approaching the conversion narratives of those who have grown up in the faith and those who have grown up outside the faith differently. Smith comments that “second-generation Christians often find it particularly challenging to discern the contours of their conversion experience. Their story tends to lack a clear beginning and end.”<sup>24</sup> Parents and church leaders should take a gracious posture in approaching the personal faith development of those who have grown up in church. “The church needs to be a place where this transitional status is okay, a safe place

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<sup>22</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 159.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 215.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 212

for those who have no previous Christian identity or orientation as well as for those who have been raised in church who are, through the grace of God, coming to an adult affirmation of their faith.”<sup>25</sup> In seeking to help children who grew up in the faith articulate their own conversion narrative, Smith advises:

However, even second-generation Christian can identify key influences - the character of their religious upbringing, persons who played significant roles in their spiritual awareness, key events - and the theological significance of the influences and events. The most crucial question for a second-generation Christian is really quite straightforward: When did I begin to assume adult responsibility for my life? There are three vital marks of adult responsibility: identity, security, and loyalty. A child finds identity, security, and loyalty in his parents; when we assume adult responsibility as Christians, we find our identity in Christ, we find our security in Christ, and we ultimately give our loyalty to Christ. We have never really become a Christian until we recognize that loyalty to our parents is not synonymous with loyalty to Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Smith expands on this idea of adulthood and personal faith understanding for children of believers by stating:

A second-generation conversion may well be linked to adult identity; frequently conversion is the act by which a person becomes an adult. This is a critical life transition: from submission to parents’ authority to submission to God’s authority, from faith mediated through parents to a faith expressed directly to God, from following parents’ sense of right and wrong to assuming moral responsibility for one’s life, from loyalty to parents to fundamental loyalty to God.<sup>27</sup>

As students progress into their senior year of high school, they are beginning to make the shift from parental authority to divine authority. Smith confirms both the timing and the importance of the “Sharing Our Stories” rite of passage experience for the students in this project as they are finishing up the final stages of high school and beginning to transition into the adult world of college, career, and beyond.

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 212.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 212.

## Teenage Development and Youth Culture

In processing teenage development alongside their own spiritual growth, James W. Fowler's *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* helps to define the ongoing process of a student's spiritual growth. Though those ascribing to a Christian worldview may disagree with Fowler's fundamental definition of faith,<sup>28</sup> the categories that he gives for the personal development of that faith correspond to the way believers have grown in faith throughout history. Fowler sees faith as something that happens universally regardless of a belief system behind that faith. He explains that "faith rather than belief or religion, is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief."<sup>29</sup> Fowler's stages of faith can be summarized in the following chart:

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<sup>28</sup> Fowler defines faith as: "People's evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others, and world (as they construct them) as related to and affected by the ultimate conditions of existence (as they construct them) and shaping of their lives' purposes and meanings, trusts and loyalties, in light of the character of being, value and power determining the ultimate conditions of existence (as grasped in their operative images - conscious or unconscious - of them)" (James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* [New York: Harper One, 1981], 92-93.). Those embracing a biblical worldview would likely reject the notion proposed by Fowler's definition that the individual constructs their own faith based on their own subjective experiences rather than on the basis of objective truth.

<sup>29</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 14.

**Table 2. Fowler's Stages of Faith**

	Stage	Typical Age	Description
<b>Stage 1</b>	Intuitive- Projective	Preschool Children	The stage were "our first <i>pre-images</i> of God have their origins...they are composed from our first experiences of mutuality, in which we form the rudimentary awareness of self as separate from and dependent upon the immensely powerful others, who were present at our first consciousness and who 'knew us'...at our first self-knowing" (Fowler, 121).
<b>Stage 2</b>	Mythic-Literal	Elementary Children	"The stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes" (Fowler, 149).
<b>Stage 3</b>	Synthetic-Conventional	Teenagers	The stage when "a person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family...Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis of identity and outlook" (Fowler, 172).
<b>Stage 4</b>	Individuative-Reflective	Young Adults	The stage in which a person "must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes" (Fowler, 182).
<b>Stage 5</b>	Conjunctive Faith	Median Adults	The stage "accepts as axiomatic that truth is more multidimensional and organically interdependent than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp. Religiously, it knows that symbols, stories, doctrines, and liturgies offered by its own or other traditions are inevitably partial, limited to a particular people's experience of God and incomplete" (Fowler, 186).

<b>Stage 6</b>	Universalizing Faith	Few Adults	The stage in which “the persons best described by it have generated faith compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being. They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community” (Fowler, 200).
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Fowler’s stages of faith are designed to be a guide for faith development. As can be seen from the chart, the typical age does not mean that everyone’s faith progresses through all six stages, and many adults never reach the Stage 6 Universalizing Faith. In his article on “Faith Development and Faith Formation: More Than Just Ages and Stages,” Robert J.

Keeley describes a person’s transitions with the stages by stating:

It’s like the way children learn how to walk: we can say the general order in which things happen but we really can’t tell when they’re going to happen. So even though we can give the approximate ages for each of these stages there are going to be examples of people who are doing the things associated with that stage at both older and younger ages. We also need to resist the urge to think of these stages as discreet - instead there is a gradual change from one stage to the next.<sup>30</sup>

In reflecting on the transition between Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional Faith and Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective Faith, Fowler notes “Stage 3 typically has its rise and ascendancy in adolescence, but for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium.”<sup>31</sup> Though each student may not progress through Fowler’s faith stages at the same time, “the period from seventeen to twenty-two...corresponds with what

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<sup>30</sup> Robert J. Keeley, “Faith Development and Faith Formation: More Than Just Ages and Stages,” *Lifelong Faith*, Fall 2010: 20-27, accessed October 30, 2017, [http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/faith\\_development\\_faith\\_formation\\_-\\_keeley.pdf](http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/faith_development_faith_formation_-_keeley.pdf), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 172.



appears to be the optimal time for beginning a transition from a Synthetic-Conventional toward an Individuative-Reflective stage of faith.”<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the transition between a Stage 2 and a Stage 3 faith, typically in early adolescence, the students sense of “authority is located externally to the self.”<sup>33</sup> This means that they “more fully realize that they have a personal past and a personal future. They are also capable of seeing things from the perspective of other people - a skill they often use to look at themselves.”<sup>34</sup> Teenagers also “begin to put the Bible stories that they have been hearing for years into a larger story of faith.”<sup>35</sup> As teenagers begin to establish their own sense of authority of what they are going to be and how they are going to believe, the “Sharing Our Stories” teaching series forms a foundation of examples of what it would look like to lead a life of faith. The teaching series also helps students to understand the cohesiveness of the Christian worldview as lived out through the lives of those within the community of faith.

The importance of the faith transition time for students in their senior year of high school, as confirmed by Fowler’s stages of faith, makes the senior year an optimal time for the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process. As students are challenged to internalize their own belief for themselves and to help establish their own faith narrative, that would form the foundation for their future interactions with faith as they transition into life in college, career, and beyond.

In reflecting on the deep need for meaning and community in teenage culture, Chap Clark’s *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* helps to define the

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<sup>32</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Keeley, “Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 23.

<sup>35</sup> Keeley, “Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 23.

longings and unmet ministry needs of students. This study is a culmination of Clark spending time in a high school and observing students and having conversations with them regarding the needs and struggles of teenage life. In light of having adult guides through the teenage years, Clark notes that “adolescents have suffered the loss of safe relationships and intimate settings that have served as the primary nurturing community for those traveling the path from child to adult”<sup>36</sup> and “the loss of meaningful relationships with adults has been the most devastating to developing adolescents.”<sup>37</sup> In a study of 968 German 7th and 10th grade students with regard to the importance of parent/adolescent relationships, it was determined that “adolescents who felt connected with their mothers and fathers, who were satisfied with their relationships with their parents, and who exchanged emotional support with them, were more satisfied with themselves, less depressed, and less lonely.”<sup>38</sup> In addition to teenager’s deep need for adults who care and are willing to invest in them, “adolescents are hungry for a transcendent experience that provides meaning, hope, adventure, and carefree celebration - whether they seek it through partying, social networking, or video games.”<sup>39</sup> The longings for community, meaning, and relationship are all things that can be found in the context of a local church. Through a church, students can find as Clark describes that they need “authentic, intimate relationship with adults until he or she has completed much of the adolescent process.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 34.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> J. Gowert Masche and Brian K. Barber, "Connectedness and Separation in Parent-Adolescent Relationships: Indicators of a Successful Identity Development?," (April 19, 2001): ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed October 31, 2017), 8.

<sup>39</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 163.

<sup>40</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 195.

Through the “This Is My Story” teaching series, students are invited to hear first hand into the lives of adults who shared their life journey with them. The sharing of personal stories opens the door to deeper and more intimate relationships as students begin to realize that they can come to an adult who may have had similar struggles to them who can come alongside them, encourage them, counsel them, and point them to Jesus. Through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process, students are given an opportunity to walk through their own life journey with a caring adult who could offer encouragement, challenge, and counsel. Throughout the process of this project, students are introduced to adults who cared about them and for them and who were willing to be that caring adult pointing them to a path of hope, life, and adventure that is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ and through a connection to a local church.

In helping to understand the first year of college and the challenges that high school seniors will face, Tim Clydesdale’s *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* presents research that helps lay the foundation for knowing how to help better prepare students for this transition. Though many would assume that the first year of college would lead to many changes in the lifestyle and decisions of students, Clydesdale’s research tends to note that the students’ changes in patterns and priorities may be less than one would expect:

The first year out, rather than being a time when behavior patterns and life priorities are reexamined and altered, is actually a time when prior patterns and priorities become more deeply habituated. What the vast majority of teens focus on during their first year out is daily life management: the manage the simiadult relationships that now characterize their social interactions; the manage their adult freedoms to use substances and be sexually active; and they manage expanded responsibilities for their daily life including money, food, and clothes.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 15.

Though the first year of college seems to be a time of stability, Clydesdale discovers that when it comes to student's faith and church involvement remains stable in one arena but changes in others:

How and to what extent does religion's role alter during the first year out? The answer may surprise some readers: other than a drop in rates of active religious involvement, faith's role hardly alters at all. Teens described virtually the same religious faith at the end of the first year out as they did at its beginning, except that their frequency of attendance at religious services declined.<sup>42</sup>

According to this research, college students are seeing a separation between their own personal faith and their need to be involved in a community of faith. Clydesdale goes on to further explain this distinction and approach: "Some clergy may find comfort in learning that most American teens do not, by and large, abandon their identification with religious faith during their first year out. Religious involvement drops, to be sure, but not teen's self-identification as a religious person and not their hopes to become reinvolved in religious faith sometime 'in the future.'"<sup>43</sup> So why would college students see their own personal involvement in a community of faith as something that is for later on in their lives? Clydesdale explains:

Teens view religious faith and practice as largely irrelevant to this stage in their life cycle. Religion is something they did as "kids" and something they will probably do again as "adults." But, for now, teens tune out religion - at the very moment when they make decisions that can affect the rest of their lives and during the very time when they individually establish patterns of everyday living.<sup>44</sup>

Students are walking away from the influence and guidance of a community of faith when they are in the very moments when they need it the most. Though they may not be

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<sup>42</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 60.

<sup>43</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 205.

<sup>44</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 205.

abandoning the beliefs that they have allowed to shape their lives, they are abandoning the community that helps them to seek to apply and live out those beliefs in the context of everyday life.

Through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship journey, seniors will be encouraged not just to look at their own faith, but the people and local church that helped them develop and grow. By understanding that their faith journey to this point in their lives was something that was strongly influenced and shaped by others, they will be able to practically see how the role of others is something that should continue to shape and influence their faith in the future.

In approaching the topic of teens and religion, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) and Christian Smith’s work focusing on high school students in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* and focusing on college students in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* are foundational sources. In *Soul Searching*, the research begins by discovering that students tend to follow their parents in views on religion. Smith explains:

What we learned by interviewing hundreds of different kinds of teenagers all around the country is that the vast majority of American teenagers are exceedingly conventional in their religious identity and practices. Very few are restless, alienated, or rebellious; rather, the majority of U. S. teenagers seem basically content to follow the faith of their families with little questioning. When it comes to religion, they are quite happy to go along and get along.<sup>45</sup>

With the strong reliance on a family’s own approach to faith, parents tend to have more influence than they realize. Smith notes that “the importance of faith for teenagers closely tracks the importance of faith for their parents. Parents for whom religious faith is quite

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<sup>45</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119-120.

important and are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is important; while parents whose faith is not important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important.”<sup>46</sup>

Though most teenagers have, according to the research, a positive view of religion following the religious foundation set by their parents, teenagers personal investment and value placed on their own religion is not very high. Smith explains:

The majority of U. S. Teenagers are not rebellious toward religion but are generally rather positive about and conventional in living out religion. This fact should not, however, be presumed to mean that religion is among the most important concerns in the majority of U. S. teenagers’ everyday lives. Conventionally, after all, very easily lends itself to routine and inertia.<sup>47</sup>

Smith goes on to describe teenagers’ view of religion as “a taken-for granted aspect or presence that mostly operates in the background of their lives”<sup>48</sup> and “mostly part of the furniture in the background of their lives.”<sup>49</sup> So what does a background religion look like for a teenager in the context of their everyday life? Smith notes:

For most U. S. teenagers, religion is something to personally believe in that makes one feel good and resolves one’s problems. For most, it is not an entire way of life or a disciplined practice that makes hard demands of or changes people. Stated differently, for many U. S. teenagers, God is treated as something like a cosmic therapist or counselor, a ready and competent helmet who responds in times of trouble but who does not particularly ask for devotion or obedience.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of commitment to God expressed by most teenagers in the NSYR leads to a view of God that does not look like the God of the Bible. Smith coins the term

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<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 129.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 140.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 148.

“Moralistic-Therapeutic Deism”<sup>51</sup> to describe this belief system held by teenagers in the NYSR. The description of this belief system is:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>52</sup>

This system of belief in God clearly does not correspond to a biblical worldview. It is merely a self-focused view of a god of self-help. Smith theorizes on the source of this failure to believe and be able to communicate historic beliefs: “it is apparent that most religiously affiliated U. S. teens are not particularly invested in espousing and upholding the beliefs of their faith traditions, or that their communities of faith are failing in attempts to educate their youth, or both.”<sup>53</sup> Since the passing on of the doctrines of faith has not been effectively done by teenagers surveyed in the NYSR, what impact does faith have on teenagers? Smith explains:

Are religious youth any different from nonreligious youth? Is faith actually consequential in the lives of American teenagers or not? Ironically, although many teens cannot see it or are not able to articulate it...the differences between more religious and less religious teenagers in the United States are actually significant and consistent across every outcome measure examined: risk behaviors, quality of family and adult relationships, moral reasoning and behavior, community participation, media consumption, sexual activity, and emotional well-being. Religiously active teenagers are in fact quite different from religiously disengaged teens in a host of ways...which suggests that there is definitely something about religious belief and practice that shapes adolescents’ lives in positive directions.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162-163.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 218-219.

Though faith impacts high school students' life decisions and life direction, the NSYR still exposes a strong miscommunication from the tenants of a biblical belief from one generation to the next.

In *Souls in Transition*, Smith further explores the NSYR with regard to the older demographic of emerging adults. For many emerging adults just like teenagers, "religion for the most part is just something in the background."<sup>55</sup> With regard to students transition from their teenage years to their emerging adult years, "the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years reflects a great deal of religious continuity and stability, but also a significant amount of religious change, most of which works in the direction of religious decline."<sup>56</sup> So what are the reasons for this further decline in religious engagement? Smith proposes three possibilities. First, Smith notes:

...we have good reason to believe that the sheer plentitude of life transitions that emerging adults experience themselves has the tendency to lessen the frequency and importance of religious practices and potentially undercut established religious beliefs. In the face of these factors, emerging adults staying religiously active - assuming they even were active as younger adolescents - requires that the life of faith be made a high priority in life, one that can overcome countervailing forces.<sup>57</sup>

Second, Smith proposes:

Part of emerging adult's central life task of standing on their own is establishing identity differentiation. Many people assume that this task is taken on mostly during the teenage years, those supposedly rebellious years when adolescents figure out who they are apart from being children of their parents. Of course, identity differentiation begins during the teen years, but a great deal of it today is accomplished during the twenties, in emerging adulthood.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 212.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 76.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 78.



Third, Smith notes that religion is viewed as something that is not applicable or coherent with emerging adults' desires and current plans in life:

Religion is part of settling down, which belongs to the future. Framed as a social causal mechanism, emerging adults' interest in indefinitely maintaining all of their options tends to decrease their desire and ability to commit to the investments, routines, and disciplines of religious faith and practice. Sustaining strong religious belief, practices, and membership in a specific community of faith requires emerging adults to forego some options, close some doors, make some consequential decisions, and commit to something particular that will have opportunity costs.<sup>59</sup>

The lack of focus on faith combined with the desire to become independent from parents and the view of religion being for a later time can lead emerging adults to shift their focus on the importance of their beliefs and being connected to a Christian community. So, what are the long-term effects of students embracing this religious decline? Smith proposes:

In sum, the importance and practice of religion generally declines between the age periods of 13-17 and 18-23. Some or even many American youth go into something of a religious slump during these years. But that decline or slump does not seem to be cataclysmic for their religious lives - at least as far as the statistics can reveal. Most of them do not appear to abandon their faith, decide that its entirely unimportant, or radically altar their beliefs. Most appear to retain and perhaps soften the subjective aspects of their religions and simply further background and downplay their faith as a salient and publicly practiced pair of their lives during these years.<sup>60</sup>

For many emerging adults, "religious ideas are for the most part abstract agreements that have been mentally checked off and filed away. They are not what emerging adults organize their life around."<sup>61</sup>

Since one of the purposes of the discipleship process of the next generation is that faith would be understood and internalized where it would impact the lives of Christians

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 80.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 142.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 154.

at every life stage, what factors according to the NSYR survey contributed to those who remained faithful to their faith as emerging adults? Smith notes:

Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely to (1) to have internalized their parents' religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously.<sup>62</sup>

Besides the influence of parents practicing faith, Smith notes the following factors that contributed to the emerging adults that remained faithful: "the teenager having more adults in a religious congregation to whom he to she can turn for support, advice, or help,"<sup>63</sup> "intense teenage devotional practice in the form of frequent personal prayer and reading of scripture,"<sup>64</sup> "high teenage importance of religious faith,"<sup>65</sup> "the drive for identity continuity,"<sup>66</sup> and "having many religious experiences."<sup>67</sup> These are all components of the teenage faith of a student who is devoted to Jesus as a follower of Him and who is plugged into the community of a local church where the student's faith can be encouraged and guided to grow through a process of discipleship.

Smith remarks that through the NYSR study "we have shown that youth committing to live their lives for God is one important religious experience that is among the most important factors in leading teenagers into the highest levels of emerging adult religion."<sup>68</sup> This finding of a committed life of a student as a teenager leading to a committed life as an emerging adult should bring encouragement to parents and those

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<sup>62</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 232.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 233.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 234.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 236.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 236.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 238.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 246.

who desire to minister to the next generation. Smith concludes that “religious outcomes in emerging adulthood are not random happenstances about which all bets are off after age 18. Instead, they often flow quite predictably from formative religious influences that shape persons’ lives in earlier years.”<sup>69</sup>

Throughout Smith’s research, the importance of an intentional discipleship program for students that they can embrace and apply in the context of their real lives emerges as one of the true foundations of a lifelong faith. Though some students will see faith as something in the background of their lives that they can push aside and ignore until they come to a point of need, many students who are willing to embrace the call to faithfully follow Jesus can see their faith flourish as they walk with Jesus into new stages of life. In the “Sharing Our Stories” teaching series, the importance of a lifelong faith is told through the personal narratives of saints that have faithfully desired to walk with Jesus. These testimonies of God’s work in the lives of everyday people allow students to see that faith is not something that someone should seek to grow out of; rather it is something that they should seek to further grow into. Through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship plan, the seniors are able to begin to further formulate their own journey of faith and connectedness to that faith that will be the same foundations leaders would hope that they would continue to develop in the next stage of life. The “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process also allows time for leaders to help students understand their own beliefs and to help encourage them to embrace a biblical worldview.

In building off of Christian Smith’s work and the NSYR, Kenda Creasy Dean offers a helpful work for the application of teaching a sustainable faith to students in her

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<sup>69</sup> Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 256.

book *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. Dean notes based on the NSYR and Christian Smith's work that "in short, American teenagers may engage in substantial amounts of youth ministry and Christian education, but they do not seem to be spending much time in communities where a language of faith is spoken, or where historically orthodox Christian doctrines and practices are talked about or taught."<sup>70</sup> According to Dean, it is not that students are not attending a church, but it is that they are not being spiritually formed when they are at the church. She proposes that local churches embrace the historical practice of catechesis, which she describes:

From the earliest days of the church, faith instruction involved guides (catechists) who were themselves participants in the church's behind-the-wall conversations. A catechist walked beside the novice Christian throughout the formation period, both to vouch for her character (since sometimes spies came in from outside the wall), as well as to interpret the in-house, behind-the-wall conversation for the newcomer, showing her how to use the cultural tools of the Christian tradition. The idea was to introduce her to a way of life, not just a way of believing - to translate God's radical acceptance of us in Jesus Christ into radical acceptance of one another.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the history of some segments of Christianity, Catechesis was employed as an intentional process where young believers were taken under the care of an older believer to help teach them and guide them in the ways of the faith. Dean goes on to comment on the great benefit of the strategic process of catechesis by stating:

Catechesis shapes missional imaginations, which help us recognize God's activity in Jesus Christ and in us, as Christ calls us to participate in his redemptive work in the world. Catechesis clarifies the church's understanding of who God is; shapes our ability to participate in the Christian community; provides the means for discerning our call as disciples and for claiming our hope in God's future. Catechesis, therefore,

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<sup>70</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>71</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 118.

gives teenagers the cultural tools that stake up a young faith, improve teenagers' exposure to the Son and therefore the likelihood that their faith will mature and bear fruit. Catechesis makes young people - and the rest of us - more combustible before God. Yet catechesis does not grate that teenagers will follow Jesus. Only the Holy Spirit ignites faith, transforming human effort into a holy fire that comes roaring into our lives at the first hint of welcome, insistent on igniting us, sharing us, and being shared.<sup>72</sup>

One of the elements of helping students to grow through catechesis that Dean mentions is the role of testimony and encouraging students to enter into God's cosmic redemptive story. Dean notes:

What matters is not that young people belong to a particular story, but to a particular story about God. Christian identity is not determined by our own oddity as a religion, but by Jesus Christ, whose Incarnation is the evidence that God is not a distant, disinterested entity, but a living, invested, passionate Being who relentlessly loves us, forgive us, and drenches our lives in grace.<sup>73</sup>

As students connect to God's story, they see God's deep love for them and desire for intimacy with them as well as how God is using them in the world through their own journey of faith. From Dean's research, she notes "it comes as no surprise that families and communities that encourage practices in which teenagers must put religious convictions and experiences into words are more likely to have highly devoted teenagers."<sup>74</sup> Testimony is powerful to help students both understand and internalize their faith and to communicate it to others because "testimony tells the story of God in Jesus Christ using speech that is passionate, subjective, and invested. Testimony neither dissects an argument, nor makes one; it is more inclined to sing. Nor is testimony merely autobiographical; it always points to God, to what God has done, and to what we are to

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<sup>72</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 63.

<sup>73</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 66.

<sup>74</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 135.

believe this means for us and for the church.”<sup>75</sup> Testimony is a powerful tool that should be incorporated into the discipleship process of students. Dean concludes that “without a story to tell, there is no faith; without a language to tell our story, Christianity remains on mute - and the church’s missional imagination atrophies. The gospel is unambiguous: good news is meant to be shared.”<sup>76</sup>

The importance of understanding beliefs and role of testimony in both understanding and passing on of the faith are foundations for both the “This Is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship plan. As seniors walk through the discipleship plan, it is a similar context that an older disciple would walk alongside a younger disciple in a process of catechesis. Though the formal process of catechesis is not something that the denominational tradition being studied would embrace, the catechesis process of testimony mentoring and sharing fits well within the tradition. The hope and prayer is that as students begin to both better understand (through the “This Is My Story” teaching series) and better learn to articulate their own faith narrative (through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship plan) that they would begin to embrace a deep and personal faith that would abide with them throughout the further unfolding of their life journeys.

### **Passing on the Faith**

In considering the passing on of faith to the next generation, the first and primary place this transmission happens is in the home. Through Vern L. Bengston’s study *Families of Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations*, a greater

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<sup>75</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 148.

<sup>76</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 156.

understanding of this transformation of faith can be gathered. In beginning the discussion of families and religious faith, Bengston notes that “families and religion have been functionally connected as long as we have record of families and religion. These are the two social institutions most directly concerned with passing on standards of moral behavior and the continuity of social order from one generation to the next.”<sup>77</sup> Has this connection and transmission been effective? Bengston’s research notes “in sum, as we look at trends in parent-child similarity in religious tradition over the past thirty-five years, we see declines in transmission rates among the traditionally mainstream denominations and increases among Mormons and the unaffiliated, with Evangelicals’ transmission levels decreasing slightly.”<sup>78</sup> For “Evangelical Protestants, the transmission rate has been high: in 2005, 62% of parents in our sample had young adult children that were following their Evangelical tradition, down slightly from 70% in 1970.”<sup>79</sup> Though one would hope to never see a decline in faith transmission to the next generation, it seems that according to Bengston’s study that many Evangelical Protestant parents have done an effective job of passing their beliefs to the next generation.

Why has this transmission of the faith to the next generation been so effective in the families that it has? Bengston proposes the following: “the first emotional bonds we form are with our parents, and the nature of these bonds influences us throughout our lives. For many young adults, parents have been the primary influence on their spiritual and religious development, and relations with parents are linked to their first conceptions

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<sup>77</sup> Vern L. Bengston with Norella M. Putney and Susan C. Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>78</sup> Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 60.

<sup>79</sup> Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 58.

of God.”<sup>80</sup> It is through the deep and personal relationships between parents faithfully seeking to influence students in the faith that helps young adults to embrace faith for themselves. For those families actively seeking to disciple their children, the study showed that “those Millennials who grew up in a family that emphasized religious education seem to have a much more solid grasp of the history and theology of their faith.”<sup>81</sup> Bengston goes on to note:

The quality of the relationship between parent and child is a crucial component of the degree to which the transmission of religion occurs. When children perceive their relationship with parents as close, affirming, and accepting, they are more likely to identify with their parents’ religious practices and beliefs, while relationships marked by coldness, ambivalence, or preoccupation are likely to result in religious differences.<sup>82</sup>

The role of faithful parents seeking to faithfully lead their children to follow in their faith seems to be rewarded through the study while those not seeking to develop faith also get the result they are intending to produce. Bengston comments: “If the parents are not themselves involved in religious activities, if their actions are not consistent with what they preach, children are rarely motivated to follow in their parents’ religious footsteps.”<sup>83</sup> Parents are the primary factor in shaping the faith of their children.

The importance and impact of the parental faith influence on the continuation of the faith to the next generation means that whatever discipleship plan a church or student ministry tends to develop can be completely endorsed or undercut by the parents in the home. Parents should be encouraged and given resources to help pour their faith into their children. This is where the role of testimony is helpful not only in the student’s

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<sup>80</sup> Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 71.

<sup>81</sup> Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 48.

<sup>82</sup> Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 98.

<sup>83</sup> Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 72.



discipleship process at church but also in the home. As parents share their own faith journey with their children, they can help encourage them of the importance of faithfully following Jesus which they are seeking to model daily in the home.

Another helpful study regarding those students who remained engaged with their faith after high school graduation is Steve R. Parr and Tim Crites book *Why They Stay: Helping Parents and Church Leaders Make Investments that Keep Children and Teens Connected to the Church for a Lifetime*. The summary of their study is as follows:

To sum it all up, if a person growing up attended a church with a good children's ministry and a strong youth ministry, had a close relationship to one or more youth leaders, attended youth camps as a teen, and had minimal or no turnover in leadership during their high school years, he or she was very likely to still be involved in church as an adult when these factors were all combined and found to be true.<sup>84</sup>

Parr and Crites noted the importance of youth ministry in this process: "a healthy youth ministry will tend to help parents and their children make the transition into middle school, high school, and then to post-high school life. An unhealthy youth ministry or the lack of a youth ministry altogether cannot serve as an asset to a parent or child during these critical transitions."<sup>85</sup> The youth minister and the youth ministry serve as a guide for both parents and students during times of transition. Parr and Crites note that "the research did reveal that if one had a youth pastor, the relationship with him or her was significant."<sup>86</sup> The study also found that the long-term commitment of the guide to the church and the students was important noting that "rotating youth pastors in and out

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<sup>84</sup> Steve R. Parr and Tom Crites, *Why They Stay: Helping Parents and Church Leaders Make Investments that Keep Children and Teens Connected to the Church for a Lifetime* (Bloomington: Westbow Press, 2015), 165.

<sup>85</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 164.

<sup>86</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 33.

every couple of years is worse for the students than having no youth pastor at all.”<sup>87</sup> The role of and influence of the student minister is important in the faith of a student lasting past high school.

Parr and Crites’ study also focused on the role of significant spiritual markers in helping students to have a long-term faith. The first significant marker they listed was a personal experience with God. They explain that “young adults who stay in church have had an experience that they point to as the moment of their salvation. When asked the open-ended question, ‘Why have you stayed in church?’ twenty percent of the responses by those who stayed pointed to a personal salvation experience”<sup>88</sup> The second significant marker listed was baptism. Parr and Crites comment: “Do you remember your baptism? If so, you are much more likely to be fully involved in the life of a local congregation than a person who was never baptized, or a person who was baptized but has no recollection of the experience.”<sup>89</sup> And “the research also revealed that the baptism experience is a significant point and actually correlated to the likelihood that a young adult has stayed in church rather than strayed.”<sup>90</sup> These significant spiritual markers became moments for students that they could use as bricks in building a faith that lasts.

Similar to the *Families and Faith* study, Parr and Crites also note the role of parents in long-term faith: “In our research, we discovered young adults were most likely to stay in church if their parents modeled a strong faith. As a matter of fact, using a factor

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<sup>87</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 107. According to Parr and Crites, “The research further highlighted the value of consistency and longevity. A mildly negative correlation was noted between those who has strayed from church and those who has several different youth pastors when they were growing up” (Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 106-107).

<sup>88</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 42.

<sup>89</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 45.

analysis to evaluate the data, a strong faith variable scored significantly higher than any other factors identified.”<sup>91</sup> Parental influence is still a very important indicator of the passing on of faith to the next generation, yet the church can still serve as a faithful resource and tool to parents as they disciple their kids.

From *Why They Stay*, the importance of the church stepping into times of transition is highlighted. That is one of the reasons that the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship model is meant to be used during a student’s senior year as they prepare for their own transition to college. The influential role of a youth pastor being a long term guide as highlighted in the study points to the power of the youth pastor stepping in and walking alongside students in articulating their own journeys of faith in the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship plan. The importance of a salvation experience and baptism as spiritual markers lead naturally to a process of students processing their own personal journey of faith and how these markers help define who they are and the path that God is calling them to. These along with other spiritual markers were highlighted and explored both in the “This Is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship plan.

### **Rites of Passage**

In processing transitions and marker moments in the life of a student, the exploration of the idea of rites of passage proves important. A great resource for understanding both the use of rites of passage in different cultures and the impacts of those marker experiences is Bret Stephenson’s work *From Boys to Men: Spiritual Rites*

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<sup>91</sup> Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 159.

*of Passage in an Indulgent Age*.<sup>92</sup> Stephenson begins by describing the role of such a marker: “rites of passage were created and designed to guide and mark transitions from one stage of life to another. They announced a developmental advancement achieved, a personal transition accomplished, and a movement from one social position to another. They chronicled the growth of an individual within the community.”<sup>93</sup> In reflecting on the challenges with many teenagers in the world, Stephenson began to realize that:

Most traditional societies, such as Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, Polynesians, Eskimos, and Africans, didn’t have any juvenile halls, gangs, juvenile violence, or addiction problems. They never had to look up their youth, try them as adults, to worry about their children getting killed by other children. What became clear to me was the fact that most of these older culture had time-honored, tried-and-true practices for working with their teens. Even more interesting was that cultures who never knew of one another’s existence had developed over countless years of trial and error, essentially the same approaches. While the delivery often differed, the underlying dynamics were always the same. It was this universality, this common thread through multiple cultures, that really opened my eyes for looking at adolescents from a more archetypal perspective.<sup>94</sup>

Further exploring these processes for adolescent growth and development, Stephenson notes:

The practices used by these diverse cultures were rites of passage, or initiations. They were designed to help guide youth through the process of adolescence. These societies did not fight adolescent development but instead worked with it for its greatest positive growth. They used boy’s propensity for risk and channeled that into an elaborate structure designed to help a youth expand his physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities, transcend childhood, and follow a healthy path into adulthood - and, even more important, manhood.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Though this thesis-project explores rites of passages from the experiences of teenage boys, rites of passage are also something that could be further explored and impact the lives of girls as well.

<sup>93</sup> Bret Stephenson, *From Boys to Men: Spiritual Rites of Passage in an Indulgent Age* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2006), 77.

<sup>94</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 5.

And Stephenson continues:

Initiations and rites of passage have been the mainstays for transforming boys into men since we first became reasoning human beings. Essentially, every culture the world has known - some come and gone, others still thriving - realized the need to initiate its boys in a structured and timely manner. Initiations were designed to help a boy stretch his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. They helped determine who was ready and who was not ready to move up into a community standing. The initiation created an opportunity for a young man to test himself, to learn what he really believed, and to prove himself and his community that he was indeed ready to act as a man. A youth's overall maturity, regardless of his age or physical growth, was the factor that determined if he was ready for such trials.<sup>96</sup>

These rites of passages set the stage for children to determine who they were and to prepare them to lead and make decisions as adults within the community. These were intentional and guided processes through which boys were challenged to grow and develop.

Though our culture has in many ways abandoned initiation rites and rites of passage, Stephenson proposes that the removal of this intentional, guided process has negative effects. He writes "even if a culture decided that initiations are no longer necessary, that does not mean the mental, emotional, and psychological processes of the boy will change. His inherent drives and cravings cannot be eliminated by culture, laws, and psychology."<sup>97</sup> Stephenson explains "becoming a man requires a deep emotional and spiritual transition, an internal shift that cannot come from an arbitrary bestowing of legal rights. This self-transcendence is more likely to take place in the course of an

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<sup>96</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 56.

<sup>97</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 73.

extraordinary experience, often in a single, memorable moment in time.”<sup>98</sup> The lack of a rite of passage experience causes students to seek their own forms of initiation because:

Often, important aspects of their development have never been addressed; as a result, the transition remains incomplete. It is possible that this omission is in part, responsible for the lack of direction some youths experience and the apprehension with which they contemplate the future. Entering the work force or embarking on higher education they often are not equipped with the necessary components of a stable adult personality such as a well-reasoned moral code, a faith or world view which sustains them during crisis and perhaps most importantly, a positive and cohesive self-image. Thus, many adolescents seek to supplement the rite of passage provided by a formal education by “finding themselves” through the intense personal experiences afforded by drugs, alcohol, and early sexual intercourse.<sup>99</sup>

What are the benefits of a moment of a rite of passage? The first benefit proposed by Stephenson is “most adolescent problems could be prevented if we brought back a unified, community-based approach to helping teens through this great developmental period of life.”<sup>100</sup> The second benefit is “the need for ceremony and ritual among humans is universal. Without them, life is empty and meaningless. Ceremony and ritual invoke Spirit into everyday life, and are based on faith in the unprovable.”<sup>101</sup> The third benefit is that a rite of passage helps “the participant find his own beliefs, his own understanding of values and ethics. The initiation helped him learn who he was.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 59.

“According to Cristina Grof, addiction expert and author of *The Thirst for Wholeness*, there are four main components to a rite of passage:

1. There is an essential shift in attitude from people who are doing the initiating...
2. The spiritual needs of youth are addressed.
3. The initiate attains a non-ordinary state of consciousness...
4. The ritual incorporates psychological symbolism of death and rebirth.”

(Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 78).

<sup>99</sup> Cassandra Halle Delaney, 1995, “Rites of passage in adolescence,” *Adolescence* 30, no. 120: 891, *Health Source - Consumer Edition*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 31, 2017).

<sup>100</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 32.

<sup>102</sup> Stephenson, *From Boys to Men*, 73.

Rites of passage are important moments in a students' lives where they are forced to wrestle with who they are, what they believe, and how it matters. The rite of passage developed in this project through the "Sharing Our Stories" framework does not include a physical element, yet the spiritual and intellectual elements of learning how to both process and communicate one's own personal spiritual journey are a foundational part of this framework. Once the student completes "Sharing Our Stories" process, it can serve both as a rite of passage for students and a spiritual marker for them to look back on.

One modern day example of a spiritual rite of passage is found in the Jewish coming of age ceremonies of *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah*, which are explored through Rabbi Goldie Milgram's book *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Spiritual Rite of Passage*. Rabbi Milgram explains "B-Mitzvah students are meant to come to know themselves better, to identify how they want to represent their coming of age as Jews, to learn to experience life as a journey, and to learn to use tribal practices as a source of inspiration for living."<sup>103</sup> Through this spiritual rite of passage, Jewish teenagers will understand both the story of their own lives as well as the story of the Jewish people and how they intersect with the real world. In reflecting on story, Rabbi Milgram notes that "Judaism places tremendous importance on the story of a person's life."<sup>104</sup> Since everyone has a different story, everyone's impact on the community will be different. Rabbi Milgram notes:

Every human being is a gift to the community. No one else has your exact design, life experience, family tradition, general legacy, talents, and ideas. On the day of becoming B-Mitzvah, the student steps forward as a teacher, thinker, and leader of the Jewish future. This is a powerful experience for

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<sup>103</sup> Rabbi Goldie Milgram, *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Spiritual Rite of Passage* (New Rochelle: Reclaiming Judaism Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>104</sup> Milgram, *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, 61.

both the youth and adult B-Mitzvah students. Family and friends get a new look at who the student is becoming. This helps family and community to give the greater autonomy that a young adult will naturally begin to seek.<sup>105</sup>

She goes on to encourage students preparing for their B-Mitzvah with the following words:

Your people want to hear your voice, to know you are learning our sacred texts and traditions and that you are able to bring us important new ideas based on your studies and perspective. Your presence in the process is very important, because into your hands is being given the opportunity to shape the future by passing the light of Torah through the lens of changing times.<sup>106</sup>

Jewish students have the great opportunity to seek to discover their own story, the story of their faith, and communicate to the gathered community of faith how their faith impacts the world.

The Jewish process of B-Mitzvah as presented by Rabbi Milgram is a helpful approach to understanding how to design a spiritual rite of passage for the modern age. The “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship framework is designed very similar to this model. The students in both models work with a mentor, learn about their own background of faith, put the pieces of their spiritual journey together, think through how their faith will influence the world, and then share their findings with a community of believers. The B-Mitzvah preparation model serves as a helpful example of a rite of passage that can be adapted for an Evangelical Protestant context.

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<sup>105</sup> Milgram, *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, 11.

<sup>106</sup> Milgram, *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, 118.



## The Role of Story

In addressing the role of story, Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* stands as the classic text. Campbell describes myth by stating:

No, mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth - penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words, beyond images, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told. So this is the penultimate truth. It's important to live life with experience, and therefore, the knowledge, of its mystery and of your own mystery. This gives life a new radiance, a new harmony, a new splendor. Thinking in mythological terms helps to put you in accord with the inevitable of this vale of tears. You learn to recognize the positive values in what appear to be the negative moments and aspects of your life. The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure.<sup>107</sup>

Though Campbell would not agree with the idea of ultimate truth<sup>108</sup> and the foundations of a biblical worldview,<sup>109</sup> his ideas on connecting into a great story beyond that defines and helps navigate our own story are very important things to understand. In reflecting on the removal of religious mythology from education, Campbell remarks:

Greek and Latin and biblical literature used to be a part of everyone's education. Now, when these were dropped, a whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. It used to be that these stories were in the minds of people. When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. It gives you

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<sup>107</sup> Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 206.

<sup>108</sup> Campbell comments that "the person who thinks he has found the ultimate truth is wrong" (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 65).

<sup>109</sup> On the topic of myths being believed by religions, Campbell comments that "every religion is true in one way or another. It is true when understood metaphorically. But when it gets stuck in its own metaphors, interpreting them as facts, then you are in trouble" (Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 67). On turning a myth into your theology, Campbell comments "mythology is very fluid. Most of the myths are self-contradictory. You may even find four of five myths in a given culture, all giving different versions of the same mystery. Then theology comes along and says it has got to be just this way. Mythology is poetry, and the poetic language is very flexible. Religion turns poetry into prose. God is literally up there, and this is literally what he thinks, and this is the way you've got to behave to get into proper relationship with that god up there" (Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 174). Campbell's practical application from religions and their corresponding myths is that "all religions have been true for their time. If you can recognize the enduring aspect of their truth and separate it from the temporal applications, you've got it" (Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 182).

perspective on what's happening to you. With the loss of that, we've really lost something because we don't have a comparable literature to take its place.<sup>110</sup>

Without a central cultural narrative of myths, a culture loses the narrative backdrop through which one can determine how the world works and his or her place in it.

Campbell notes that the role of myth is especially important during different stages of life transition:

Mythology has a great deal to do with the stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state to the married state. All of those rituals are mythological rites. They have to do with your recognition of the new role that you're in, the process of throwing off the old one and coming out in the new, and entering into a responsible profession.<sup>111</sup>

The loss of connection to historical mythologies also effects how an individual will begin to understand and express their own personal story. Campbell notes "we all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We need to understand death to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are."<sup>112</sup>

The stories of our cultures and traditions help to form people and through forming and understanding their own stories people reform the world.

The importance of a historical and mythological story shaping ones own personal story stands at the foundation of this project. Through both the "This Is My Story" teaching series and the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship process, students were taught clearly the biblical narrative of the gospel, exposed to examples of how the gospel story might develop through the life of another person, and coached and mentored through a

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<sup>110</sup> Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 4.

time of writing and sharing their own journey of faith. This process and project is a call understanding the power of story found in the Bible to help students to both embrace and internalize this story.

When approaching the role of our stories entering into a larger story, Amanda Hontz Drury's book *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development* is an insightful resource on the way that testimony not only forms the person testifying but the community itself. Drury begins by explaining her understanding of testimony:

In the past, I understood testifying in the most rudimentary terms: a testimony was a story someone told about her experience with God. Testimonies, in my mind, were largely descriptive narratives of something that occurred in the past. What I didn't realize, however, was that the testimonies shared went beyond mere description and moved into the realm of construction. People were not just describing the past; people were being changed as they spoke. And this kind of construction was not just present for the speaker; those of us receiving the testimony were also being formed.<sup>113</sup>

We often talk our way into our beliefs. We have a hard time finding legitimacy in our beliefs if we are unable to talk about them. Often, we hold on to hidden beliefs, opinions and feelings that are only made accessible to us after we verbalize them."<sup>114</sup> She continues "if we want something to seem 'real' to us, we must be able to talk about it. We will have a difficult time maintaining Christian faith if we are unable to talk about this faith."<sup>115</sup> If someone is going to talk about his or her faith and testimony, what would he or she say and how would he or she go about it?

Drury begins laying the foundation for developing a testimony by noting:

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<sup>113</sup> Amanda Hontz Drury, *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 15.

<sup>114</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 31.

<sup>115</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 42.

Everyone has a spiritual story. Everyone has some kind of narrative that describes his or her spiritual journey. However, not everyone has access to this narrative, and even if a person is aware of this narrative, he or she might choose not to articulate it. Regardless of whether or not it is acknowledged or articulated, however, they still have some kind of spiritual narrative. Articulation allows us to bring a story to expression, which is central to constructing identity.<sup>116</sup>

According to Drury, a spiritual journey lives within every person. The question then is how would a person begin to understand the spiritual journey inside them? Drury proposes that the understanding of one's spiritual journey comes through the community of faith in a local church. She notes "my community helps train my eyes to see where God is at work in my life. My community helps supply my mouth with language to narrate these experiences. And my community provides me with a framework in which I might interpret these experiences."<sup>117</sup> Drury continues "we do not and cannot foster our own spiritual identity by ourselves; communities are what help us construct our narrative identities, maintain our narrative identities, and strengthen our narrative identities."<sup>118</sup> The people with whom believers choose to surround themselves helps to shape their own spiritual journeys: "communities shape people. We are not the only characters in our personal narratives; our story did not fall into our mind free of other's fingerprints. The stories we share and the ways in which we construct meaning in our life are largely due to the company we keep."<sup>119</sup> And "all members of a community belong to one another's stories. As a result, one of the jobs of the community is to hold what is said accountable to the community's understanding of truth."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 63.

<sup>117</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 67.

<sup>118</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 68.

<sup>119</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 73.

<sup>120</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 84.

Drury also sees testimony as impacting not simply the speaker but the listeners as well:

We are both permitted and obliged to testify. Testimony as witness is the lifeblood of the church today. We testify as evidence that God did not limit his in-breaking to the biblical world. We testify today because God did not withdraw his presence following the early church. God is just as present in our world as he was in the apostle Paul's world. And the same God commissions witnesses to testify to his ongoing, continued presence.<sup>121</sup>

Testimony has power because it reminds the congregation that God is at work in the lives of real people today. Drury reminds the church that also has power because of the source of the testimony is God himself:

But the truth of the matter is, before a word of testimony is on our lips, the Holy Spirit has been testifying to our own spirit, speaking into and forming our identity - preparing us in such a way that we might have the spiritual eyes to catch a glimpse of where and how God might be at work in our lives, and empowering us to testify to that effect. Anything true and good concerning God that comes from my lips has its origins in the Holy Spirit testifying to my spirit.<sup>122</sup>

In light of teenagers hearing the testimony of others, Drury remarks: "we give teenagers a great gift when we expose them to a wide range of testimonies. They are at an advantage when they hear that the even-keel, methodical outline of a narrative from William is just as valid and worthy of hearing as the bubbly, emotional testimony from Janelle."<sup>123</sup> She goes on to further explain the importance of sharing testimonies with students:

We expose teenagers to spiritual narratives not for entertainment value and not just to engage their imaginations. Rather, we expose them to spiritual narratives because the Holy Spirit uses our narratives to construct spiritual identities. We expose our teenagers to spiritual narratives because we recognize...that our dearest life commitments are often embedded in these

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<sup>121</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 88.

<sup>122</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 113.

<sup>123</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 135.

stories. We immerse our teenagers in these stories hoping they will take on this “accent” to which they are exposed.<sup>124</sup>

Through listening to testimonies, teenagers begin to understand and develop their own language of faith by which they can in turn articulate their own testimony.

The teenage years are a good time developmentally for students to begin working on learning to both understand and articulate their own faith journeys. Drury notes “the emergence of adolescence is an ideal time for this kind of articulation to be cultivated. It is in these early adolescent years that most individuals begin to understand their lives in storied, historic terms.”<sup>125</sup> A focus on testimony for a teenager also helps the student to help form their own spiritual identity. Drury notes “when we testify, we articulate the stories that help define who we are. These stories are indelibly linked to our identity.”<sup>126</sup>

Drury goes on to raise concerns for students who have not helped to solidify their own spiritual identity through the practice of testimony:

...without a story an identity suffers. Whether or not they realize it, those who are unable to articulate their story face disruption of their identity. The same can be said for their spiritual identity. We are best able to thrive spiritually when we can articulate our narratives in a meaningful way. This is done in conjunction with our community who helps construct, maintain and strengthen our personal spiritual identity.<sup>127</sup>

The overwhelming impact of this lack of this practice means that, according to Drury, “regardless of how often a teenager attends her church, if she is unable to articulate some kind of narrative concerning where God is present in her life, she risks upheaval of her

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<sup>124</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 138-139.

<sup>125</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 15.

<sup>126</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 54.

<sup>127</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 86.

spiritual identity.”<sup>128</sup> On the other hand to help students to both understand and articulate their testimony “develops and deepens authentic Christian faith for adolescents.”<sup>129</sup> Drury exhorts her readers with the following challenge:

Inarticulacy is a problem for mature Christian faith. The solution to inarticulacy is not simply asking people to talk. It is not necessarily the implementation of a new educational plan on the importance of testifying (though I imagine that would not hurt). What we need is for our teenagers to be nurtured to see the world through a spiritual lens that allows them to live in a state of perpetual Advent, looking for the ways in which God interacts with their stories. When and if this Advent is realized, we must give space and opportunity for our teenagers to practice this newly acquired language in such a way that they might echo the apostle John with both confidence and humility that “I have seen and I testify...” (John 1:34).<sup>130</sup>

The importance and impact of listening to other people’s testimonies and coming to understand and share a testimony cannot be understated. Intentionality and focus in this area of discipleship can yield great results.

The importance of testimony as a discipleship tool and a foundation for faith identity as argued in *Saying Is Believing* serves as an argument for this thesis project. The timing of the project focusing on teenagers as well as the impact of both hearing testimonies and learning how to articulate your own testimony stands as the foundation for both the “This Is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process.

With regard to the role of stories forming one’s own personal identity, Dan P. McAdams book *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* is an

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<sup>128</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 63. Though this statement seems to favor the extroverted student and hinder the introverted one, the understanding and articulation of one’s story does not have to happen in a group setting of public testimony, though that would be an ideal setting.

<sup>129</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 19.

<sup>130</sup> Drury, *Saying Is Believing*, 167.

important work. McAdams notes the importance of teenagers beginning to develop their own story by stating: “A life story is a personal myth that an individual begins working on in late adolescence and early adulthood in order to provide his or her life with unity or purpose and in order to articulate a meaningful niche in the psychosocial world.”<sup>131</sup> He further explains the importance of knowing one’s story:

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too much come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of self - the personal myth - that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years.<sup>132</sup>

So how does McAdams define this “personal myth?” “A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterns integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future.”<sup>133</sup> McAdams’ research was done primarily through personal interviews helping subjects to both explore and define their own personal myths. In reflecting on this research, McAdams comments:

But an individual does not suddenly invent a personal myth in the course of an interview. The myth is there all along, inside the mind. It is a physiological structure that evolves slowly over time, infusing life with unity and purpose. An interview can elicit aspects of that myth, offering me hints concerning the truth already in place in the mind of the teller.<sup>134</sup>

The process of interviewing seniors and helping them to walk through their own story in the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship framework is designed around this research.

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<sup>131</sup> Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>132</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 11.

<sup>133</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 12.

<sup>134</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 20.



Late adolescence and early adulthood is an ideal time for people to begin exploring their own personal myths because during that time “we begin to develop a historical perspective on our own lives.”<sup>135</sup> McAdams explains:

We first become self-conscious myth makers in our late-adolescent years, when we confront head-on the problem of identity in human lives. The adolescent begins by consciously and unconsciously working through an ideological setting for the myth - a backdrop of fundamental beliefs that situated the story within a particular ethical and religious location. Therefore, the transition from adolescence to youth adulthood is an especially significant phase in the development of human identity. A fundamental challenge of myth making in adolescence and young adulthood is to formulate personally meaningful answers to ideological questions so that one’s identity can be built on a stable foundation.<sup>136</sup>

He continues:

It is not until late adolescence or young adulthood that a human being typically begins to think of his or her own life in storied, mythic terms. Before adolescence, we have no life story. We have no identity. But this does not mean that we construct our identity in adolescence from nothing. Instead, we have been “collecting material” for the story since Day One, even though we don’t remember Day One.<sup>137</sup>

For many adolescents, identity has just become important to them in this stage.

McAdams explains that “because of certain biological, cognitive, and social changes that do seem to occur in the adolescent years, the stage is psychosocially set for the emergence of identity as a new problem of life at this time.”<sup>138</sup> In navigating the new challenges of forming one’s identity, a caring adult can be of great help to an adolescent.

McAdams comments:

Parents, teachers, ministers, and friends may help to shepherd the adolescent through difficult passages in life. They may provide invaluable advice about decisions concerning school, work, and love. In world

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<sup>135</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 102.

<sup>136</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 36.

<sup>137</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 40.

<sup>138</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 75.

mythologies, the young hero frequently receives critical help from wise benefactors - sages, goddesses, and supernatural aides. Without their help, the hero's journey is probably doomed.<sup>139</sup>

In processing the long-term impact of such myth making, McAdams notes:

By the time a person has moved through adolescence and entered young adulthood, he or she has experienced a good deal of growth and development with respect to ideological setting. It is likely that beliefs and values that were once rather simplistic and egocentric have become articulated in more mature ways, in a more sophisticated ideological framework that sees shades of gray and subtleties in the determination of what is good and what is true.<sup>140</sup>

He goes on to explain:

Sometime during late adolescence or young adulthood, therefore, most of us reach a point when we feel fairly confident about what we believe to be right and true. In adolescence, we are temporarily drawn away from stories toward a more abstract and logical systems. Stories for a time fail to provide reliable and valid ideological answers. But after the consolidation of an ideological setting in late adolescence or young adulthood, we are ready to return to story, this time from the standpoint of the story maker - the adult charged with authoring his or her own personal myth.<sup>141</sup>

The timing of the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship framework for our high school seniors is built around this important time of identity transition. One of the goals of this process is that students would be shepherded to process their own stories and help understand the beliefs and priorities, emerging from their stories, that would help to define their own beliefs and decisions in the future.

As a person serves as a story maker crafting their own personal myth, the role of both processing and framing their own personal history becomes important. In commenting on the process of understanding one's history, McAdams states "stories are

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<sup>139</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 79.

<sup>140</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 90.

<sup>141</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 90.

less about facts and more about meanings. In the subjective and embellished telling of the past, the past is constructed - history is made.”<sup>142</sup> He continues that “the remembrance of things past is highly selective, and it involves substantial reconstruction. There is no objective way of recording human lives. Experience is inherently subjective.”<sup>143</sup> So how does one begin to explore and build his or her own history through the process of constructing a personal myth? McAdams explains:

As we begin to adopt a historical perspective on the self in adolescence and young adulthood, we select and reconstruct those scenes from our past that are the climaxes of different acts of the life story. I call these scenes nuclear episodes. These past episodes represent our subjective memories of particular events, in particular times and places, which have assumed especially prominent positions in our understanding of who we were and, indeed, who we are. Nuclear episodes may include, but are not limited to, high points, low points, and turning points in our narrative accounts of the past.<sup>144</sup>

In the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship framework, these nuclear episodes are framed as spiritual marker moments that students can look to as turning points in their own personal journey of faith.

In considering the personal impact on the storyteller through the interview and story constructing process, McAdams notes:

After the interview, people often remark that they found the process of telling their story to be profoundly enlightening. “I learned a lot of things about myself.” they may say. “It got me thinking about a thing I don’t usually think about.” Although its intended function is to gather data on lives, our life-story interview may also serve to help people identify the personal myth that they have been living all along. Such an identification may help in the process of changing the myth should the person feel that change is required.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 28.

<sup>143</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 293.

<sup>144</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 296.

<sup>145</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 253

In summary, “the process of focusing on the life and translating it into words helps the author identify and construct a coherent view of self.”<sup>146</sup> Through the process of this thesis-project, students will be able to help better form their own identity through exploring and beginning to process their own stories of faith.

In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall understands the power of story. He writes “story - sacred or profane - is perhaps the main cohering force in human life. A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond our kinship tiers? Story.”<sup>147</sup> Gottschall continues:

Story - whether delivered through films, books, or video games - teaches us facts about the world; influences our moral logic; and marks us with fears, hopes, and anxieties that alter our behavior, perhaps even our personalities. Research shows that story is constantly nibbling and kneading us, shaping our minds without our knowledge or consent. The more deeply we are cast under story’s spell, the more potent its influence.<sup>148</sup>

He notes that religious stories are the most influential form of story:

Throughout the history of our species, sacred fiction has dominated human existence like nothing else. Religion is the ultimate expression of stories’ dominion over our minds. The heroes of sacred fiction do not respect the barrier between the pretend and the real. They swarm through the real world, exerting massive influence. Based on what the sacred stories say, believers regular the practices of their lives: how they eat, how they wash, how they dress, when they have sex, when they forgive, and when they wage total war in the name of everything holy.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 254.

<sup>147</sup> Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2012), 138.

<sup>148</sup> Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 148.

<sup>149</sup> Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 119.

The view of religion and its influence as written by Gottschall in this book and seen in this quote does not reflect a biblical worldview, yet he still notes the power and influence of story as seen in religious stories to impact the decisions and direction of a person’s life.

Like McAdams, Gottschall also understands the influence of story on personal identity. He comments “a life story is a ‘personal myth’ about who we are deep down - where we come from, how we got this way, and what it all means. Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity.”<sup>150</sup> Through the thesis-project, students will be able to better frame their own identities by helping to explore and identify their own stories of faith.

Gottschall, like McAdams before him, also questions the reliability of a person’s account of their past in recounting their own personal life story. He explains “a life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that us replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings.”<sup>151</sup> He argues that “scientists have discovered that the memories we use to form our one life story are boldly fictionalized.”<sup>152</sup> Gottschall continues:

...the past, like the future, does not really exist. They are both fantasies created in our minds. The future is a problematic simulation we run in our heads in order to help shape the world we want to live in. The past, unlike the future, has actually happened. But the past, as represented in our minds, is mental stimulation, too. Our memories are not precise records of what happened, and many of the details - small and large - are unreliable.<sup>153</sup>

Though a person’s memories of their past may not be completely reliable, a person can still look back to see moments in their life and understand how they have allowed those moments to change and shape them. Looking at these moments from the past, or “spiritual markers” as the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship framework terms them, can help a person understand how he wants to shape and define his future.

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<sup>150</sup> Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 161.

<sup>151</sup> Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 161.

<sup>152</sup> Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 18.

<sup>153</sup> Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 169.

In *The McDonalization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future*, John Drane writes of the power of story. He notes that “story provides people a vehicle through which to express themselves at moments of pain and turmoil. As a genre, it facilitates the articulation of deep insights and emotions far more easily than detached, rational explanation has ever been able to do.”<sup>154</sup> Drane also realizes the power of stories being shared in the community of the church:

If the personal stories of Christians are going to help others on the spiritual journey, it will not be because our stories are different, but precisely because they are no different. Our lives are just as broken, fragmented, dislocated, but the really good news is that by connecting our own personal stories with God's bigger story, and the Bible stories, we can be empowered in the struggle to find direction, meaning, and purpose.<sup>155</sup>

As students hear other's stories and connect their story into the gospel, they begin to grasp how God is at work in their lives.

Drane echoes the focus on narrative that stands at the center of this research project. The personal narrative of testimonies is best explored in the context of an overall plan for the discipleship of students.

### **Discipleship**

In helping to define and provide a biblical process for discipleship, Michael J. Wilkins' *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* is a good starting text. Wilkins defines discipleship as “the ongoing process of growth as a disciple. Discipling implies the responsibility of disciples helping one another grow as

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<sup>154</sup> John Drane, *The McDonalization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Macon: Smith and Helwys, 2001), 158.

<sup>155</sup> Drane, *The McDonalization of the Church*, 173.

disciples.”<sup>156</sup> He continues that “discipleship is not a second step in the Christian life but rather is synonymous with the Christian life.”<sup>157</sup> As a disciple, Wilkins argues that discipleship should effect a follower of Jesus’ entire life. He notes that “discipleship means to follow Jesus and become like him - like him not only in church, but like him in the everyday circumstances of life.”<sup>158</sup>

When it comes to discipleship, the church has typically relied on programs to help to coordinate the discipleship process. In reflecting on the church’s programmatic approach to discipleship, Wilkins notes that “discipleship is not simply a program through which Jesus ran the disciples. Discipleship was life. That life began in relationship with the Master and moved into all areas of life.”<sup>159</sup> With relation to discipleship and the local church, Wilkins remarks:

Discipleship is not just a limited program with the church. Discipleship is the life of the church. Since the true church is composed only of disciples, the overall activities of the church are to provide for the care, training, and mission of the disciples as they follow Jesus in this world. The purpose and mission of the church, therefore must be understood in the terms of comprehensive discipleship.<sup>160</sup>

Discipleship is the purpose and life of the local church. Churches should be growing disciples through all of their ministries. Wilkins also comments that when seeking to define discipleship “we should also go one step further to suggest that discipleship is a process. If we view discipleship as the Christian life, we will naturally assume that it is a lifelong process. Too often we speak of a discipleship ‘program’ that we have taken or

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<sup>156</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 41.

<sup>157</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 31.

<sup>158</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 292.

<sup>159</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 124.

<sup>160</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 299.

initiated.”<sup>161</sup> Discipleship is a lifelong process by which a person grows in his or her own faith and continues to develop in that faith impacting his or her world. The church stands as a constant helper, encourager, and partner as a disciple seeks to follow Jesus.

From *Following the Master*, the process of discipleship and the churches role in it helped to define this thesis-project. Though the “This Is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process are merely a step in the overall lifelong growth process of a student, they will be intentional moments in which the church can speak into a student’s own process of growth. Through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process, these intentional moments of interaction will come through a one-on-one conversation about a student’s spiritual growth and where they stand with God.

A classic work on discipleship that helps to define walking with Jesus is Eugene Peterson’s *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Peterson defines discipleship as: “the Christian faith is the discovery of that center in the God who sticks with us, the righteous God. Christian discipleship is a decision to walk in his ways, steadily and firmly, and then finding the way that integrates all our interests, passion and gifts, our human need and our eternal aspirations. It is the way of life we were created for.”<sup>162</sup> In reflecting on the journey that we were made for, Peterson writes:

The Christian life is going to God. In going to God, Christians travel the same ground that everyone walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground. The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know that we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by

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<sup>161</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 344.

<sup>162</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 134.



God; and therefore, no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil, he guards our very life.<sup>163</sup>

This is the walk of discipleship. It is a walk of faith in the midst of the everyday world knowing who rules the world and stands as sovereign over that world. In the middle of that world, “we Christians believe that life is created and shaped by God and that the life of faith is a daily exploration of the constant and countless ways in which God’s grace and love are experienced.”<sup>164</sup> Therefore, “discipleship is a decision to live by what I know about God, not by what I feel about him or myself or my neighbors.”<sup>165</sup>

Discipleship is seeing God’s work in the world and seeking to live faithfully for him in light of that work.

Through this thesis-project, the everyday and common nature of walking with Jesus and His consistent work in our lives and in the world is highlighted. In the “This Is My Story” teaching series, speakers highlighted how Jesus interacted with their everyday lives and how He worked in and through them. Through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process, students were challenged to begin to see the world through these eyes and look for where God had worked and is continuing to work so that they could share that work with others.

*The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* by Bill Hull also helps to shape and define discipleship in the local church. In seeking to define discipleship, Hull notes that “discipleship isn’t a program or an event; it’s a way of life. It’s not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn’t for beginners

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<sup>163</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 45.

<sup>164</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 45.

<sup>165</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 87.

alone; it's for all believers for every day of their life. Discipleship isn't just one of the things the church does; it is what the church does."<sup>166</sup> Hull's view of discipleship echoes Wilkins' view, yet Hull goes on to further elaborate on the ideas proposed by Wilkins. He notes that "without discipleship, Christianity doesn't exist, because following Jesus activates the Christian faith."<sup>167</sup> Without discipleship, no one would be able to come to know and follow Jesus. Therefore, Hull passionately describes the power of discipleship in stating "discipleship involved saving people from themselves and eternal oblivion, permitting the transforming power of God to change them from the inside out."<sup>168</sup> How does this transformational process take place? Hull writes that "relationships of trust provide the foundation for transformational discipleship. Only in trusting relationships can we honestly deal with barriers to obedience and overwhelming sins that hold us back from spiritual growth."<sup>169</sup> It is through trusting relationships with others that this process can take place and people can grow into who God is making them to be.

The relational process of discipleship, as highlighted by Hull, is important to both the "This Is My Story" teaching series and the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship process. Through the "This Is My Story" teaching series, the students were welcomed relationally through personal narrative into the lives of the storytellers. In the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship process, students were brought into a conversation with an adult who cared about them, knew them, and wanted to see them grow for them to help process their own spiritual journeys including their own struggles to follow Jesus.

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<sup>166</sup> Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 24.

<sup>167</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 15.

<sup>168</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 26-27.

<sup>169</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 156.

Another helpful book in exploring discipleship is David Watson's *Discipleship*.

Watson defines a disciple and discipleship as:

A disciple is a follower of Jesus. He has committed himself to Christ, to walking Christ's way, to living Christ's life and to sharing Christ's love and truth with others. The verb to disciple describes the process by which we encourage another person to be such a follower of Jesus, it means the methods we use to help that person to become mature in Christ and so be in a position where he or she can now disciple someone else.<sup>170</sup>

Simply put, "discipleship means knowing him, loving him, believing in him, being committed to him."<sup>171</sup> Watson goes on to emphasize the importance of relationships in the discipleship process: "Discipleship involves a life of realism and sharing. We are called to share our lives both with Jesus and with other disciples."<sup>172</sup> Through deep relationships, Christians share their own lives and spiritual journeys with each other, and people are discipled through listening to other's stories and learning how to live the Christian life alongside other believers. Watson notes "this is discipling at its best, when deep personal relationships are formed within a small group of Christians who are living together, working together, sharing together."<sup>173</sup> In reflecting on the early church's community, he comments "this sense of Christian community for all disciples was so strong and fundamental in the first century that salvation outside the church was considered impossible."<sup>174</sup>

Watson's book reaffirms the process of relationship building and living in community that was emphasized through this thesis primarily through the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship process. Relationships and the local church is central to a

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<sup>170</sup> David Watson, *Discipleship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 66.

<sup>171</sup> Watson, *Discipleship*, 23.

<sup>172</sup> Watson, *Discipleship*, 48.

<sup>173</sup> Watson, *Discipleship*, 81.

<sup>174</sup> Watson, *Discipleship*, 50.

Christian's own growth in grace and helping to understand who God has called them to be and how God is at work in their lives.

In reflecting further on the relational nature of discipleship, Robert Coleman's *The Master Plan of Discipleship* proves to be a helpful resource. Coleman writes:

When all is said and done, our education will not be much better than our teachers or the opportunity to learn much more than the way the teacher and student can be together. This is what the apostolic church was doing in its development of disciples. In their community life, Christians developed an atmosphere conducive to growth. Questions could be asked and issues clarified without intimidation. Mutual trust existed. Whether in an organized group meeting or informal friendly fellowship, the church translated theory into practice. To a remarkable degree, truth was demonstrated in real life. What they said and did was an object lesson in reality. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the beginning steps of persons just coming to Christ. These spiritual babies were immediately surrounded with love and made to feel a part of the family circle. No one could feel left out. Here was a community in which all shared the bonds of an everlasting covenant.<sup>175</sup>

The community of the early church was so connected to each other that faith conversations and the interworking of faith into the daily living of life happened naturally as new believers would watch the actions of and dialogue with older believers. Coleman emphasizes the importance of these relationships by stating “disciples must have devoted Christian friends to follow, and this can only be facilitated by being together over a period of time.”<sup>176</sup> In a church culture that is so often age and life stage segregated, the church must look for ways to foster these relationships.

The “This Is My Story” teaching series is designed to provide a step in helping to open up the door for these intergenerational faith discussions and relationships. Those

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<sup>175</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1987), 63.

<sup>176</sup> Coleman, *Master Plan of Discipleship*, 64.

who came and shared their stories of faith were from all different age groups<sup>177</sup> within the church as well as people who served within different areas of the local church. This allowed students to meet and listen to the stories of those who were different from them who also are people that the students can reach out to and further engage with them as they see them in church.

Another helpful resource in thinking about discipleship and the local church is Gary Parrett and Steve Kang's book *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church*. Parrett and Kang note that "we might say that the ministry of discipleship involves meeting people where they are and then helping them to go where they must go."<sup>178</sup> They go on to argue that the most effective way to disciple people is through a ministry of catechesis. Parrett and Kang describe an effective ministry of catechesis as:

A sound ministry of catechesis has several essential features. It is relational, involving dynamic interaction between the catechist and the catechumen, all in the context of the entire faith community. It is liturgical, occurring chiefly in the worship of the gathered community. It is holistic, engaging the full humanity of catechumens - their minds, hearts, and bodies. It is culturally responsive, paying careful attention to the backdrop in which catechumens are living and against which they receive this vital instruction. It is pedagogically strategic, featuring sound educational processes and practices. And it is content rich, focused properly, as we have said on the essentials of the faith.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Those who came to share their stories of faith were selected by the researcher after emailing the pastoral staff team at Meadow Brook Baptist Church for recommendations as well as asking other youth ministers in the community for speakers outside the church.

<sup>178</sup> Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 136.

<sup>179</sup> Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, 89.

Through this process of catechesis, as described by Parrett and Kang, new believers are connected to the community through relationships, taught the core doctrines of the faith, and encouraged to live out their faith in the midst of the world.

In reflecting on rites of passage in spiritual development, Parrett and Kang note that “one of the most important and powerful of all formative tools is ritual. Ritual is a daily part of all our lives - individually and corporately - and, as is so often the case, it can be formative for either good or ill.”<sup>180</sup> And they challenge that “the need for meaningful rites of passage is inherent in our humanity, and the church would be wise to address it.”<sup>181</sup>

Through the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process, the teaching regarding the cores of the gospel and its connection to a student’s life, as outlined in Parrett and Kang’s catechetical process, is employed. The relational nature of the process comes through the student processing his or her story with another adult. The rite of passage and ritual element is found when the high school seniors return to the youth group to share their own stories of faith.

Gary A. Parrett expands upon these ideas in his book with J. I. Packer titled *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*. Building disciples through catechesis has historical roots. According to Packer and Parrett, “historically, the church’s ministry of grounding new believers in the rudiments of Christianity has been known as catechesis. It is a ministry that has waxed and waned through the centuries.”<sup>182</sup> In reflecting on the role of catechesis in the Christian life, Packer and Parrett comment:

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<sup>180</sup> Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, 321.

<sup>181</sup> Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, 331.

<sup>182</sup> J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 22.

Catechesis, however, is not always responsive. Indeed, it is in the first instance more of a preemptive ministry. It seeks to lay spiritual, moral, and theological foundations that can help grow a church and its individual members toward maturity, so that they will not be easily swayed by deceptive doctrines or moral compromises that will, invariably, arise to trouble them (see Eph, 4:11-16). It aims, in other words, to prevent struggles before they begin, anticipating the, and as we say, nipping them in the bud.<sup>183</sup>

According to Packer and Parrett, Catechesis has a strong biblical example in Jesus: “we catechize because of the model and mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was and is the model catechist. He was the Teacher of teachers. It is not only his example that moves us to catechize, however. We catechize by command of Jesus.”<sup>184</sup>

Where should one begin the process of catechism? Packer and Parrett write of the importance of story as a basis for the process of catechesis:

Augustine believed that this Story, which he called the *narratio*, was the best place to begin *procatechesis* - that is, the preliminary catechizing of those interested in becoming Christians or at least in learning more about the Faith. To such as these, Augustine wrote, the catechist should tell the Story in a compelling fashion. Rather than surveying all of the Scriptures, emphasis will be placed on a selective “unrolling the scroll” before the hearers, highlighting the most critical episodes in the drama. For Augustine, the *narratio* would extend from creation to the current age of the church.<sup>185</sup>

In reflecting on the application of the story-based catechesis, Packer and Parrett comment:

A story-based catechesis might be very congenial to many church leaders today, especially where it is perceived that the surrounding culture is largely postmodern in orientation. While a feature of postmodern thought is its dismissal of all forms of a single metanarrative that fits all persons in all culture, interest in hearing the stories of others is irrepressibly human and often very keen. Thus some evangelistic ministries have moved from

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<sup>183</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 45.

<sup>184</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 49.

<sup>185</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 82.

more propositional presentations of the Gospel to more narrative-based approaches.<sup>186</sup>

Stories form a great foundation for engaging beliefs in a way that is personal yet also connects to our culture. This form of catechesis helps to merge personal stories of individuals with the great cosmic story of the gospel.

Using the story of the gospel as a beginning point to the catechesis of believers places the gospel at the central focus. Packer and Parrett note that “the gospel will be not only the starting place for our catechizing; it will guide us from beginning to end.”<sup>187</sup> The gospels impact continues all throughout a person’s spiritual growth and process of personal catechesis:

The Gospel is proper content not only for the earliest stages of catechesis but for every phase. Many have argued that every sermon must contain some proclamation of the Gospel. The Gospel is also visually portrayed and proclaimed through the sacraments. In formal catechesis, too, we may move forward in the Gospel, but we never move on from the Gospel. The Faith, as we have said, includes the Gospel and its implications for life and doctrine. It also constitutes the critical content for catechesis.<sup>188</sup>

The gospel is central and must remain central. In writing on the centrality of gospel content in catechesis, Packer and Parrett note “the same essential content could be used throughout one’s life but could be engaged through different processes in different stages.”<sup>189</sup> But the church and Christian must remember “having begun our journey in the Gospel we must move on, and indeed can move on, only in that same Gospel.”<sup>190</sup>

Packer and Parrett help to build the gospel and narrative foundation of this project. The goal of the “This Is My Story” teaching series is that students will see the

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<sup>186</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 82-83.

<sup>187</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 83.

<sup>188</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 85.

<sup>189</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 138.

<sup>190</sup> Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 141.



gospel and its power in action in the stories of others. The goal of the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process is that students begin to wrestle with their own narratives of faith and begin to understand the depths of the gospel through which their life long process of discipleship will lead them to grow into in deeper and deeper ways as they seek to follow Jesus as a disciple.

Another proposed process for discipleship is presented in Steve Garber’s *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*. Garber’s focus of discipleship centers around the formation of a Christian worldview. He comments:

Worldviews are not abstractions; they become ideas with legs that have a metaphysical and moral muscle, enabling real people to make the hardest choices possible. Mentors are not interesting ideas; rather they become the primary means by which beliefs are interpreted and understood, especially when what one believes is a matter of life and death, when what one believes has consequences for the way the world is and ought to be. Community then becomes the laboratory in which our hopes and dreams become real; we do not keep on keeping on without people of kindred heart and mind pledging their own lives toward the same end, holding us up when the world, the flesh, and the devil call into question our core commitments and cares.<sup>191</sup>

This worldview process develops under the guidance of an older mentor and is then sustained by ongoing participation in the community of faith in a local church. In order for this worldview to develop, belief must be connected to behavior. Garber explains this process:

If understanding how belief becomes behavior is the result of a textured reading of the history of ideas, the ethic of character, and the sociology of knowledge, then understanding those who have kept faith over the years - who with substantial integrity have connected belief to behavior, personally as well as publicly - requires the weaving together of these three strands: convictions, character and community.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 21.

<sup>192</sup> Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 51.

Garber goes on to describe someone as having convictions that “they were taught a worldview which was sufficient for the questions and crises of the next twenty years, particularly the challenge of modern and postmodern consciousness with its implicit secularization and pluralization.”<sup>193</sup> Those who embraced convictions “met a teacher who incarnated the worldview which they were coming to consciously identify as their own, and in and through that relationship they saw that it was possible to reside within that worldview themselves.”<sup>194</sup> The power of relationships in the conviction stage of integrating a worldview into one’s life cannot be overstated. Garber notes that “again and again, it is that dynamic relationship of a faculty member opening his life up to a student which enables young people to understand that their worldview can also become a way of life.”<sup>195</sup> The person serving in this mentor role can vary depending on the student’s relationships: “professors, professionals, and pastors all serve as older friends whose cares and commitments incarnated into the substance of the worldview which the student is learning to embrace.”<sup>196</sup> Once a student embraces the conviction stage of a worldview, he or she moves on to the community stage in which “they made conscious choices over the years to live out their worldview in the company of mutually committed folk who provide a network of stimulation and support which showed that the ideas could be coherent across the whole life.”<sup>197</sup>

Garber’s system of worldview development formed a great framework for this thesis-project. With a goal of students growing with a community of faith over a lifetime,

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<sup>193</sup> Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 51.

<sup>194</sup> Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 51.

<sup>195</sup> Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 143.

<sup>196</sup> Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 143.

<sup>197</sup> Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 52.

Garber's approach to worldview change leads to tangible steps hopefully leading to that result. Through the "This Is My Story" teaching series, students with growing convictions could see examples of character which come from their own community of faith.

Through the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship process, students were aided in taking their convictions and developing them into character as they were guided by an older mentor with the hopes that it will result in a desire for community which will continue once they graduate high school.

Discipleship develops character and change in a Christian, and this character and change nature of discipleship is helpfully explored in N. T. Wright's *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. Wright defines discipleship through the lens of character in the following way:

For a start, it is a call, not to specific acts of behavior, but to a type of character. For another thing, it is a call to see oneself as having a role to play within a story - and a story where, to join up with the first point, there is one supreme Character whose life is to be followed. And that Character seems to have his eye on a goal, and to be shaping his own life and those of his followers in relation to that goal.<sup>198</sup>

We become people of character when we reflect the character of Jesus through discipleship. This reflection of the character of the ultimate Character puts us in a peculiar place. Wright comments "human is this a kind of midway creature: reflecting God to the world, and reflecting the world back to God."<sup>199</sup> This reflection of Christian character, however, is not an immediate thing that happens in the lives of people: "Character is a slowly forming thing. You can no more force character on someone than you can force a tree to produce fruit when it isn't ready to do so. The person has to

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<sup>198</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York, Harper One, 2010), 17.

<sup>199</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 74-75.

choose, again and again, to develop the moral muscles and skills which will shape and form the fully flourishing character.”<sup>200</sup> As believers grow in their character, they begin to more fully reflect the character of Jesus.

The framework of character and narrative as employed by Wright is helpful both in the personal stories of people and connecting them to the grand story of the Bible:

It is, in particular, a way of locating ourselves as actors within an ongoing drama. No matter how many smaller stories there may be within scripture, and how many million edifying stories there may be outside of it, the overall drama of scripture, as it stands, forms a single plot whose many twists and turns nonetheless converge remarkably on a main theme, which is the reconciliation of heaven and earth as God the creator deals with all that frustrates his purpose for his world, and through his Son and his Spirit, creates a new people through whom he is purpose - filing the world with his glory - is at last to be realized.<sup>201</sup>

This narrative nature of the scriptures and a person’s journey with God is helpful because:

We are storied creatures; we naturally love stories because our lives are filled with tension and resolution, and at any given moment there is likely to be more tension than resolution. So we identify with this character or that, with this moment or that, with this or that twist of the plot...and we are hooked. We want to know what happens, how it works out. We want resolution, closure, a sense of justice being done, or at the very least some sense of completeness.<sup>202</sup>

The stories that connect with people do not simply meet them where they are; they help to change and develop them: “but scripture trains us to listen and learn from stories of all kinds, inside the sacred text and outside, and to discern patterns and meanings within them. And stories of all sorts form and shape the character of those who read them.”<sup>203</sup>

Stories shape who we are and impact the world when they begin to reflect the cosmic

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<sup>200</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 35.

<sup>201</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 261.

<sup>202</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 264.

<sup>203</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 264.

story of the great Character. The narrative nature of both discipleship and connecting our stories to the cosmic story of the gospel stand as foundations for this research project.

When processing discipleship in the context of student ministry, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations Into the Family of Faith*, edited by Chap Clark, is another helpful resource. In Michael McEntire's chapter, he focused on the impact of stories on students by noting: "stories hold power, enable perspective, foster respect, build relationship, and create space for community. Our personal stories shape and are shaped by the stories around us and combine to crest the stories of our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, our culture, and so on."<sup>204</sup> Stories have even greater power when connected to the grand story: "Theology lives between the stories - God's story of the world, and humanity's ever-changing account of itself and all things. Theology is what happens when the two stories meet."<sup>205</sup> Just like has been seen in other works throughout this literature review, stories have power to impact when being combined with the gospel story.

In reflecting on adults influencing students through discipleship, the contributors to *Adoptive Youth Ministry* note "transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults."<sup>206</sup> These caring adults help the church to begin to feel like a family. Cheryl A. Crawford comments: "a family-like environment in which the adults

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<sup>204</sup> Michael McEntire, "Thinking (Practical) Theology," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 100.

<sup>205</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 91.

<sup>206</sup> Mark Cannister, "Thinking Ecclesialogically: Teenagers Becoming Part of the Church," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 137.

proactively seek to include and welcome young people to participate as members of God's family gives long-term ministry a much better foothold for lifelong faith to develop."<sup>207</sup> The relationships that build in the family of the church help students build a long-term faith.

In *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, Steven Argue helpfully argues that faith is naturally a transition. He notes "youth pastors need to recognize that faith is actually one giant transition. It is dynamically changing, and the role of youth ministry is not to preserve young people's faith as much as it is to help them mature it. Maturity is about transformation, change, and transition from less mature forms of faith to more mature and reliable ways of living our faith."<sup>208</sup> Argue continues:

When we think of faith as a perpetual transition, we begin to see faith as a process that is owned by the whole church. We must work together to ensure that our young people are given support and opportunities to grow their faith, creating ministries that prepare them for a life of faith that is dynamically changing and growing. The youth pastor's role can no longer be to protect faith and to create "safe place" for young people (as though faith were safe!). Instead, he or she must provide space for young people and the whole community to journey together as their faith changes, grows, and matures.<sup>209</sup>

The transitional and growing nature of faith goes back to the idea that discipleship is a lifelong process and that the church should come alongside students to speak into that transition process and encourage them to go forward into greater depth in their own faith.

The articles from *Adoptive Youth Ministry* help to reaffirm the use of story in the discipleship process as well as the impact of caring adults in that process. The

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<sup>207</sup> Cheryl A. Crawford, "Thinking Long Term," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 183.

<sup>208</sup> Steven Argue, "Rethinking Church Strategies and Structures" in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 332.

<sup>209</sup> Argue, "Rethinking Church Strategies and Structures," 332-333.

transitional nature of faith, as proposed by Argue, is something that is also encouraged in this thesis project. Through the “This Is My Story” teaching series, students were able to observe the transitional nature of faith in the lives of others. In the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process, high school seniors are able to see the transitional nature of faith in their own story as they prepare for the next transitional phase of life into life after high school in college or career.

In studying churches that effectively ministered to students, Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin wrote *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. The study notes the importance of the high school to college transition time: “across cultures, a major turning point for young people’s faith seems to be high school graduation. Multiple studies highlight that 40 to 50 percent of youth group seniors - like the young people in your church - drift from God and the faith community after they graduate from high school.”<sup>210</sup> In teaching and discipling students in the faith, the *Growing Young* study notes the importance of a gospel narrative:

Because Jesus’ message best makes sense when it is understood as a part of a larger story, the role of narrative theology and narrative teaching has been reemerging of late, and this trend is a hopeful one for churches like yours. By narrative theology, we mean interpreting each part of the Bible within the whole unfolding story of God and God’s people. Narrative teaching is closely related in that leaders locate particular texts in the context of the whole story.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 17.

<sup>211</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 139.

Grand narrative teaching is important because “when a people can see their story located within God’s story, the work of the church gains greater meaning.”<sup>212</sup> The study also shows that this is an effective way of engaging students in a long-term faith:

According to our research, churches that communicate the gospel of Jesus as the centerpiece of God’s story are more likely to have young people with greater faith vibrancy and maturity. What’s more, those who talk about the gospel in narrative terms also tend to rate their churches higher on teaching people how to interact with culture, and they rate themselves personally higher on responding to current social issues in light of faith. It may be that interacting with the story of scripture increases a young person’s ability and commitment to interact with the story of their culture.<sup>213</sup>

Understanding one’s story leads to a natural desire to share one’s story. The *Growing Young* study notes “across traditions and denominations, churches growing young frequently integrate testimony as a part of their regular worship and spiritual formation. These testimonies include conversion experiences, breakthroughs, the provision of new jobs, and stories of God’s ongoing work in and around the people of the church.”<sup>214</sup>

The *Growing Young* study also notes the power of rituals: “rituals have served throughout the Christian tradition as channels through which to answer deeper questions of identity, belonging, and purpose with God’s response of grace, love, and mission. Rituals embody meaning through actions that are deeper than words alone can convey.”<sup>215</sup> Through rituals and rites of passage, students can gain a deeper understanding of who they are and who God is calling them to be. In looking at the entire process of adults helping students to embrace and live faith for themselves, Powell, Mulder, and Griffin note:

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<sup>212</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 140.

<sup>213</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 140.

<sup>214</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 155.

<sup>215</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 155.



Our Fuller colleague Steve Argue asserts that we can't simply hand faith to adolescents and emerging adults - they have to birth it through the work of the Holy Spirit. Leaders and trusted adults, then, are like midwives in this process. If faith is a noun, then we might say faithing is an appropriate verb to describe this process of formation and meaning-making. It is how we ask, reach, and doubt our way toward a mature faith identity. If we commit to bear with young people on a journey of faithing, perhaps churching is how we can talk about doing this together, following Jesus as a community discovering faith in our own particular context day by day. So rather than assuming a young person is "losing" their faith when they doubt, struggle, or push back against our understanding of God and faith community, we welcome their angst as an opportunity for us to "church" - as a verb - together toward even deeper shared experiences of the living spirit of God. When we "faith" and "church" together, we teach young people...not just what to believe but how to believe - and live out - the Good News. And we refuse to leave them alone in the process. Which sounds a lot like taking Jesus' message seriously.<sup>216</sup>

Discipleship is the process of a caring adult coming alongside a student to walk with them through their own struggles, doubts, and identity issues as the Holy Spirit continues to form them into people of faith.

The *Growing Young* research helps to reaffirm the timing of the "Sharing Our Stories" discipleship process as well as the ritual nature of the seniors developing their own stories and sharing them with others. It also affirms the narrative approach to both the gospel and the sharing of stories that was used throughout the thesis-project.

For insight on designing discipleship strategies in student ministry, Duffy Robbins' books *The Ministry of Nurture: A Youth Workers Guide to Discipling Teenagers* and *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples: A Small Book About a Big Idea* are helpful. In seeking to frame the role of discipleship in student ministry, Robbins notes that "our task in youth ministry is not just helping young people to become

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<sup>216</sup> Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 158-159.

Christians; it's helping young people to be the Christians they've become."<sup>217</sup> In defining student discipleship as joining students in their own process of growth in Jesus, he goes on to note:

A ministry of establishing and building starts from the ground up. We begin with students where they are and grow them from there. Each student's pilgrimage will be unique. Our job his not to start them where we are, or where we want them to be. Our calling is to start them where they are and to move the forward to maturity from that point.<sup>218</sup>

Robbins continues:

It's almost as if we've forgotten that our main purpose in youth ministry is to help students move forward on that pilgrimage of growth through which they become progressively more dependent on God and more intimate with God, whole becoming progressively less dependent on the second-hand feeding that comes through youth group. If we're building students whose faith is dependent primarily on a weekly skit, a creative Bible study, or a simmer camp that is "the best week of your life," then we're building Christians whose faith won't sustain them beyond the high school years.<sup>219</sup>

Furthering his discussion of discipleship, Robbins comments:

Discipleship is about transformation of heart and mind, it's about a progressive, growing maturity. Youth ministries that embrace this discipleship mission will be focused on the process of encouraging students to grow into the likeness of Christ by helping them to put away both childish notions about God and childish ways of making life decisions.<sup>220</sup>

For a student to grow in this process of discipleship, relationships are essential.

Robbins comments that "youth ministry is all about connection - connecting kids to Jesus, connecting kids with their families, connecting kids with their peers, connecting

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<sup>217</sup> Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples: A Small Book About a Big Idea* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2011), 20.

<sup>218</sup> Duffy Robbins, *The Ministry of Nurture: A Youth Workers Guide to Discipling Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 211.

<sup>219</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, 85.

<sup>220</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, 100.

kids with other supportive adults, and connecting kids with the church at large.”<sup>221</sup> These relationships are essential because:

The emphasis on Christian community is not only a matter of pragmatic programming, it is a matter of survival. Research has shown that one of the greatest predictors of a teenager’s ongoing growth in Christ is membership in and commitment to some sort of Christian fellowship. Simply put, spiritual growth means a growing sense that one is a vital part of a Christian community.<sup>222</sup>

Through this community, students come to know who they are in Christ and what it looks like to live a life of faith. Robbins notes “our students are much more likely to remember what we’ve said while we’re walking beside them than when we are standing in front of them. Is it any wonder that in three years of public ministry, Jesus spent only a fraction of his time preaching to large crowds and the bulk of it in the company of individuals and small groups of disciples?”<sup>223</sup>

The communal and relational nature of a discipleship model forms the basis for this thesis-project especially in the “Sharing Our Stories” process of helping our high school seniors understand and articulate their own spiritual pilgrimage as they walk alongside a caring adult.

The book *Gospel Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, edited by Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson, reinforces what the other sources explored in this chapter communicate regarding the nature of discipleship and power of story. In his chapter on “Making Disciples Who Make Disciples,” Darren DePaul defines a disciple as “a lifelong

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<sup>221</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, 103.

<sup>222</sup> Robbins, *Ministry of Nurture*, 28.

<sup>223</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, 59.

learner who is following and growing in relationship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>224</sup> He goes on to remind youth workers that:

We must remember as youth leaders that discipleship is a journey - a long journey. Large groups, small groups, one-on-one meetings, mission trips, and the like all play a part in that journey for our students, but the focal point must always be Jesus. We should be teaching, leading, showing, and modeling to our young people that being a disciple is not about a program or our personality, but rather about following Jesus in all of life.<sup>225</sup>

In her chapter “Emulating God’s Heart: Building Relationships in Youth Ministry,” Liz Edrington speaks to the power of the gospel story by stating that “God has written (and is writing) your story with unique twists and turns, dreams and disappointments that shout of his bigger story, the kingdom of God, that we read about in Scripture. We need to know our own story deeply because connecting with our students cannot occur unless it is a part of the conversation.”<sup>226</sup> As leaders know their own stories, it allows them to be able to help students both explore and understand their own faith stories. The knowledge of one’s story is important because “without knowing your story (your past), you miss out in the intricate ways God has been working to draw you to himself, to see and feel your need for him, to know him in darkness, and to long for him to return.”<sup>227</sup>

DePaul and Edrington help to affirm the process of discipleship and the importance of understanding and embracing one’s testimony as outlined throughout this thesis-project. The hope of connecting a student’s longing for their need for Jesus and His

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<sup>224</sup> Darren DePaul, “Making Disciples Who Make Disciples: Discipleship in Youth Ministry” in *Gospel Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, ed. Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 40.

<sup>225</sup> DePaul, “Making Disciples Who Make Disciples”, 41.

<sup>226</sup> Liz Edrington, “Emulating God’s Heart: Building Relationships in Youth Ministry” in *Gospel Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, ed. Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 72.

<sup>227</sup> Edrington, “Emulating God’s Heart,” 73.

return is something that one would hope that students embrace as they explore their own journey of faith.

This thesis-project was developed on the foundations of the ideas gathered from this literature review which has included exploring the topics of theological foundations, teenagers and youth culture, passing on faith to the next generation, rites of passage, testimony and story, and the definitions and practices of discipleship.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PROJECT DESIGN**

In seeking to determine “How can we help students form their own faith by identifying spiritual markers in their spiritual journeys and help them to understand their testimony as an ongoing work of God in their lives?” a two-layered research method is employed. The first phase of this research method is the “This Is My Story” teaching series, and the second phase is the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship model.

#### **“This Is My Story” Teaching Series**

The “This Is My Story” teaching series consists of a focus group of students in middle school and high school (sixth through twelfth grades) who attend Meadow Brook Baptist Church’s weekly Wednesday night student worship service as the primary research group. The secondary focus group consists of middle school and high school students (sixth through twelfth grades) who attend Inverness Vineyard Church’s weekly Wednesday night student worship service. These services are the primary large group teaching time for students in the context of the student ministries represented. Through the “This Is My Story” teaching series, the goal is for students to develop a personal deeper understanding of the role of testimony in the life of a Christian<sup>1</sup> and then to articulate their own understanding of their personal stories of faith through a personal interview with an outside researcher. This understanding is developed by hearing stories of God’s work through the testimonies of others, both from within the congregation and

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of testimony in both the Christian life and a student’s own identity formation is explained in Amanda Hontz Drury’s book *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development*. The importance of identity formation through narrative is confirmed by Dan P. McAdams’ book *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* and Jonathan Gottschall’s book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*.

in the community at large. The students' understanding of testimony is tested through both an initial questionnaire on the first week of the series and a final questionnaire on the last week of the series to determine the students' growth and understanding of the topic as well as a follow up interview with the outside researcher.

The initial questionnaire,<sup>2</sup> which is given prior to the series teaching, consists of multiple choice questions. The questionnaire is designed to seek to investigate the student's own understanding of the topic as a benchmark prior to any teaching on the topic being done. The first question is "Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you?" Students were given the four choices of: "not important," "slightly important," "important," or "very important." There was intentionally four choices given in order to keep students from selecting a median and non-committed response. The first question is to gauge the students' own perception of the value and/or lack of value of their own personal story of faith.<sup>3</sup> The second question is "Do you think that your story of faith is something useful to others?" Students were given four choices of: "not useful," "slightly useful," "useful," and "very useful."<sup>4</sup> The second question was designed to begin to stretch a student's own understanding of the idea that a story of faith could also impact others. The third question is a follow up question expanding on question two, and it reads "How is it useful to others?" Students are given two multiple choice answers, which are "encouraging to others for strengthening their faith" and an

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<sup>2</sup> See the initial questionnaire in the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> The term "story of faith" was used over and against the term "testimony" because in the minds of many of the students the word "testimony" simply marks the initial decision to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. The reframing of the term testimony and the deeper understanding of the "story of faith" is one of the desired focuses and outcomes of this thesis-project. This decision was influenced by J. D. Greear's book *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* and David F. Wells' *Turning to God: Reclaiming Conversion as Unique, Necessary, and Supernatural*.

<sup>4</sup> The term "useful" here was chosen in order to gauge the student's understanding of the practical nature of their own story to both encourage his or her own faith and the faith of others.

“evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus,” and an “other” option that allows students to add their own ideas. The third question encourages students to think more practically regarding how their story could impact others. The fourth question is “How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?” Students were given the following four response options: “not comfortable,” “slightly comfortable,” “comfortable,” and “very comfortable.” Question four is designed to gauge the student’s own personal place of comfortability when it comes to sharing their faith through their story. The fifth and final question on the first questionnaire is “What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith?” Students were asked to select one or more of the following responses:

- Answered prayer requests
- Conversion experience
- Moments where you felt God’s presence
- Moments where God used you
- People who encouraged you
- Trials/troubles

This list of possible answers serves as the foundation of the elements that the “This Is My Story” teaching series is designed to communicate to students through teaching and listening to other’s stories.

After the initial questionnaire, the “This Is My Story” teaching series begins. The first week of the series, the researcher set up the “This Is My Story” series concept with a



message titled “Living a Compelling Faith Story”<sup>5</sup> from 2 Timothy 1:3-7.<sup>6</sup> This message focused on the following three main points along with a follow up thought question for each:

- Our faith is influenced by others who laid the foundation. - 2 Timothy 1:5
  - When you think about your own life, who set a foundation for your faith?
- Our faith must become our own faith. - 2 Timothy 1:5
  - Is the faith becoming your own faith?
- Our faith must be practiced. - 2 Timothy 1:6-7
  - Are you practicing your faith? Do you have people around you to hold you accountable for practicing your faith?

The initial message was designed to begin to get students thinking about their own personal story while providing them the lens of looking at all stories with the understanding that their own story would be unique.

For the primary research group at Meadow Brook Baptist Church, the “This Is My Story” teaching series then focused on ten weeks of different people from the church and the community coming to share their own journeys of faith.<sup>7</sup> The speakers were selected after sending an email to the staff of Meadow Brook Baptist Church for recommendations and inviting people that the researcher knew within the community who were seeking to faithfully live out their own Christian witness. The first story came

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<sup>5</sup> See appendix for full sermon transcript.

<sup>6</sup> This passage was selected as a starting point for the series because it was foundational in the research as an example and model of faith being passed on to the next generation and the next generation’s role in growing in that same faith themselves.

<sup>7</sup> One of the desires in bringing these speakers in to share their stories is to open the door for meaningful relationships between students and adults to develop. This is a need exposed by Chap Clark’s study in *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*.

from one of the former students of the youth group at Meadow Brook Baptist Church. He is a college student who had become passionate about his faith while in college. His story focused on how he missed the opportunities that God had given him to become involved with the youth group, grow in his faith, and serve Jesus while in high school as well as how he had seen God change and use him while in college. The second story was from an outside speaker named Taylor Morton. Taylor was a former football player from the University of Alabama, who had written a book about his life story called *It's Only Pain: But It's Real and It Hurts*. His story focuses on the challenges that he faced in his life losing his brother in an accident at a young age and battling cancer. Through Taylor's story, students were able to see how God can use even the most horrible of moments for His glory and their good. The third story was from the preschool minister at Meadow Brook Baptist Church. She had taught many of the students when they were in the preschool ministry, and she shared how God led her into ministry and how He has been with her through the challenges of family struggles and raising a special needs son. The fourth story was from a senior adult lady who leads the prayer ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church and also has taught kindergarten Sunday school for years. Many of the students had sat under her teaching as kids, and they were able to hear about how God had been faithful to her through all of life's challenges including losing her husband. The fifth story was from our current senior pastor's wife. She shared how God had worked in her life growing up and what it meant to serve Jesus alongside her husband as they both served the church. The sixth story was from a local evangelist who ministers primarily to teenagers through youth conferences. The students were familiar with him since they attend his winter retreat every year. He shared how God had called him into ministry and

how God worked in his life to help him overcome his stuttering problem and speech challenges to use him as an evangelist. The seventh story was from a retired teacher who is also an amateur storyteller. He is a member of Meadow Brook Baptist Church and frequently substitute teaches in the schools where many of the students attend. He shared about the adventures of life and how God had worked through all of his experiences to use him both in the lives of others and to bring him to the place God called him. The eighth story was from the head football coach at one of the middle schools where the students attend. He came and shared how God had called him to use his platform as a coach for ministry and how God led him and his family to adopt. The ninth story was from the principal at another middle school that our students attend. He shared how he left his role as a bi-vocational youth pastor in order to fully invest himself into ministering through a local school. The tenth story was from a church member and youth parent who was the coach of the at the time state championship football team. He came and shared how God had called him to coaching ministry, how he tried to use his influence to make an impact for Jesus, and how God led him and his wife to adopt four kids from the Ukraine. All of these stories came together to highlight the fact that every person's spiritual journey looks different in struggles, trials, challenges, places of service, and impact but that God is faithful to each of his people in all moments of life.

For the secondary research group at Inverness Vineyard Church, the "This Is My Story" teaching series then focused on three weeks of different people from the church and the community coming to share their own journeys of faith with two different speakers each week. The speakers were selected by Jason Richardson, the youth pastor at IVC, and by the researcher using some of the same speakers from the series at MBBC.

The repeat storytellers from the MBBC series were the retired teacher who is also an amateur storyteller and the head football coach at one of the middle schools where the students attend. The researcher also selected the owner/operator of the local Chick-fil-a franchise to come and share his story of faith. The stories from the members at IVC were from the current IVC senior pastor's wife, a female volunteer within the student ministry, and a male volunteer within the student ministry.

Both of the series concluded with a final message<sup>8</sup> from the researcher titled "The God Who Writes Our Story" from 2 Peter 1:3-4. The message began by noting some conclusions from the "This Is My Story" teaching series regarding every person's faith journey:

- Looks different
- Contains ups and downs
- Consists of times of faithfulness and times of wanderings
- Includes times of great faith and times of doubt
- Points to a God who is sufficient

The message then went on to exegete the following four points from 2 Peter 1:3-4:

- God is the One who gives us the power to live the Christian life.- 2 Peter 1:3a
- God has called us to display His greatness to the world.- 2 Peter 1:3b
- God has given us His promises which lead us to look more and more like Him.- 2 Peter 1:4a
- God has rescued us from the power that sin held us and leads us to live as His agents of change in the world.- 2 Peter 1:4b

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<sup>8</sup> See appendix for message transcript.

After the concluding message, students were given the follow-up questionnaire.<sup>9</sup> In an effort to compare whether student's responses changed from before the teaching series to after the teaching series, this questionnaire began with the same questions asked in the initial questionnaire. The final questionnaire included a discussion question section, where students were asked to respond to the following:

- How has hearing someone's story of faith impacted you?
- How can you use your story of faith to impact others?

These final discussion questions are designed to get some qualitative feedback from students regarding how the teaching and listening to stories of faith shaped them and challenged them to become storytellers in their own lives.

After both of the series were completed, Billy Thornton, a secondary researcher and doctoral student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, met individually with students for a follow-up interview. In these interviews, the following questions were asked:

- What is your story of faith?
- Have you had an opportunity to share your story of faith with someone else? If so, what happened?
- How has understanding your own story of faith helped you in your life?

These questions were asked to determine what elements of a story of faith as covered in the "This Is My Story" teaching series were present in student's own personal stories of faith. These interviews also allowed students to share how their own understanding of

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix for concluding questionnaire.

their own story of faith has helped them share the gospel with others as well as impact how they view their own faith in the midst of everyday life.

### **“Sharing Your Story” Senior Discipleship Model**

The “Sharing Your Story” senior discipleship model<sup>10</sup> seeks to help the twelfth grade students at MBBC become storytellers of God’s work in their lives prior to graduating from the student ministry.<sup>11</sup> This process begins with a special lunch for the seniors who are interested in being involved where they are taught the “Sharing Your Story” framework<sup>12</sup> based on the four acts of the biblical narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration<sup>13</sup>. Once the seniors have an understanding of these acts, they will use the same framework to help process and craft their own story of faith.

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<sup>10</sup> In *Souls In Transition*, Christian Smith notes that one of the foundations of a lifelong faith is an intentional discipleship process. This model is a process to help in the hopeful development of a lifelong faith.

<sup>11</sup> The timing of this process as being at the beginnings of a student’s transition from high school into college is influenced by Gordon T. Smith’s the shift from parental to divine authority that happens during this time as well as the developmental shift during this time as noted by Fowler’s research from Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional Faith to Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective Faith. The importance of the church stepping into this transition time was also seen in Steve R. Parr and Tom Crites research in *Why They Stay: Helping Parents and Church Leaders Make Investments that Keep Children and Teens Connected to the Church for a Lifetime*. According to Dan P. McAdams, the time is also ideal since it is when “we begin to develop a historical perspective on our own lives” (Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* [New York: The Guilford Press, 1993], 102). In Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin’s research in *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, they refer to the transition between high school and college as “a major turning point for young people’s faith” (17).

<sup>12</sup> See the PowerPoint presentation of this framework in the appendix.

<sup>13</sup> This framework of the Biblical narrative is an adaptation from Albert M. Wolters’ *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. In Wolters’ book, the elements of redemption and restoration are combined in the single idea of “redemption.” For the purpose of this project, the ideas were separated out in order to make a clear distinction for students regarding God’s work in the student’s own personal redemptive narrative and their continuation of God’s work in the world by bringing God’s redemptive narrative to the world around them through restoration.

## Act 1: Creation

Through the biblical foundation of Act 1: Creation, students are taught the following truths:

- God stands as the originator of life and the world as we know it. - Genesis 1:1-3
- God created humans as the highlight of his creative order in His image. - Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:7
- God commanded humans to be His regents of His plan on the planet to multiply and lead the earth. - Genesis 1:28
- God declared His creation as good. - Genesis 1:31

After completing the teaching element of Act 1: Creation, students are directed to their “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” handout.<sup>14</sup> In connecting Act 1: Creation to each student’s life stories, they are challenged to begin to think about “Your Beginnings of Understanding of God” through the following questions:

- Marker:<sup>15</sup> When were your first recollections of faith before Christ?
- When do you remember hearing about Jesus for the first time?
- What were your early understandings of God?

The focus of these questions for Act 1 is to help a student remember their own origins of faith conversations and understandings in their own life. The story of God’s work in the

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<sup>14</sup> See the “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” handout in the appendix.

<sup>15</sup> “Marker” questions are those questions that may point to a specific moment in time that the student may want to include in his or her own story of faith at the end of this process. The significance of spiritual markers was seen in Steve R. Parr and Tom Crites’ book *Why They Stay: Helping Parents and Church Leaders Make Investments that Keep Children and Teens Connected to Church for a Lifetime*. In *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, Dan P. McAdams refers to these moments as “nuclear episodes” (296).

lives of these students did not begin when they first repented and believed in the gospel. God has been at work in their lives from the beginning drawing them slowly to Himself.

### Act 2: Fall

Through a biblical foundation of Act 2: Fall, students are taught the following:

- Sin is a distortion of the goodness and goal of creation. - Genesis 3:1-7
- Sin affects everyone. - Romans 3:23
- Sin leads to death and consequences for life here and now. - Romans 6:23

After completing the teaching element of Act 2: Fall, students are directed to their “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” handout. In connecting Act 2: Fall to each student’s life stories, they are challenged to begin to think about “Sin and Struggles and Its Effect on Your Faith” through the following questions:

- What are some struggles/misplaced priorities that you remember experiencing prior to following Jesus?
- What have been idols that you have struggled with putting before your relationship with Jesus?
- What are some areas of struggle where you have seen God grow and change you since coming to know Jesus?
- Marker: What are some times in your life when you have been through trials, struggles, or hard times where you have seen God work in you?
- What things, ideas, or events have helped encourage you in your struggles with sin or the results of the fall on the world?
- Where are some places where you are still seeking the Holy Spirit to work?



The focus of these questions for Act 2 is to help a student remember their own struggles to follow Jesus and how they have affected their own faith. The story of God's work in the lives of these students has been a challenge of reminding themselves of the hope and restoration in the gospel as well as the daily challenge that every Christ-follower faces of living for Jesus and not for the world.

### Act 3: Redemption

Through a biblical foundation of Act 3: Redemption, students are taught the following:

- The plan of redemption is promised as soon as sin begins to distort creation. - Genesis 3:15
- Jesus made us love and changed the direction of our lives by grace through faith. - Ephesians 2:1-9
- Jesus took our punishment at the cross so that we could receive the blessings of God.- Galatians 3:13-14

After completing the teaching element of Act 3: Redemption, students are directed to their "Where 'My Story' Meets God's Story" handout. In connecting Act 3: Redemption to each student's life stories, they are challenged to begin to think about "Conversion and the Ongoing Work of God in Your Life" through the following questions:

- Marker: Describe what happened when you first remember surrendering to Jesus as your Savior and Lord?
- Marker: When are some times when you have refocused yourself to continue to follow after Jesus?

- Describe how you have seen the Holy Spirit at work continuing to grow and change you as you have walked with Jesus.

The focus of these questions for Act 3 is to help a student remember their own moment of beginning to follow Jesus and that God is continuing to work in their lives everyday. The story of God's work in the lives of these students has been a challenge of reminding themselves that God is still at work in them making them the people he has died for them to be.

#### Act 4: Restoration

Through a biblical foundation of Act 4: Restoration, students are taught the following:

- God has made us to join Him in restoration. - Ephesians 2:10
- One day Jesus will return to make all things new. - Revelation 21:1-5

After completing the teaching element of Act 4: Restoration, students are directed to their "Where 'My Story' Meets God's Story" handout. In connecting Act 4: Restoration to each student's life stories, they are challenged to begin to think about "How Is God Using You to Help Redeem the World?" through the following questions:

- Marker: Describe a time when you felt like God was using you to make an impact.
- How have you seen God use your personality and gifts to make a positive impact on the world around you?
- Who are people that you have been able to encourage/walk with through struggles and challenges that you may have faced as well?

- Marker: Who are people who have encouraged you in your faith by serving as examples and by challenging you in your own life?

The focus of these questions for Act 4 is to help a student remember that God is at work in his or her life and is using them to change the world. The story of God's work in the lives of these students has been a challenge of reminding them that God has a great mission of which they have the privilege and responsibility of being a part.

### Next Steps in "My Story"

Students then move onto "Where 'My Story' Meets God's Story" handout to the "Next Steps in 'My Story'" where they are asked to respond to the following question: "How do you see the faith foundation that you have developed impacting your life and decisions into college/career?" This question begins to launch students into thinking about the next phase of life and the role that they see faith playing in the midst of that phase.<sup>16</sup> This is an important question because it assumes that they believe that faith will play a role in the next phase as well as an expectation that true faith will play a role.

### "My Story"

After processing their own life and story through the narrative of the acts of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, students are instructed to begin to piece their story together into a narrative form.<sup>17</sup> The goal is not for every question that was

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<sup>16</sup> Attempting to get students already considering the role of faith in their lives in the next stage is done in order to help religious belief from becoming something that merely happens in the background of one's life as seen in the NSYR and through Christian Smith's *Soul Searching* and *Souls in Transition*.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of both understanding and considering one's own faith journey is presented in Gordon T. Smith's *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation*.

answered through the “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” handout to make it into the story narrative. Through this narrative, however, students should cover their early understandings of God, sin and struggles and its effect on their faith, their conversion and the ongoing work of God in their life, and how God is using them to help redeem the world. Students are dismissed from the teaching session with their own personal story as still a work in progress.

Once students complete the draft of their story, the researcher met with each one of the students<sup>18</sup> to discuss what they learned and discovered about themselves through the process as well as helping to coach them towards sharing their story with the student ministry.<sup>19</sup> Through these conversations, students are able to help ask questions about how God may be at work and help to verbally process how certain things have shaped them. This is where the true process of one-on-one discipleship and mentoring can happen in this process.

After students complete processing their story with the researcher, they will share their story in a special “Senior Share Night” during Wednesday night worship.<sup>20</sup> By sharing their story, they are testifying to God’s ongoing work in their own lives while also encouraging other students in the ministry in their own faith.

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<sup>18</sup> This meeting and discipleship process helps to develop further meaningful relationships with students and adults, which helps to address a need exposed in Chap Clark’s *Hurt 2.0*.

<sup>19</sup> This processing of one’s story through an interview with an adult is modeled from Dan P. McAdams’ research through personal narrative interviews in *The Stories We Live By: Personal Narratives and the Making of the Self*.

<sup>20</sup> The sharing of the story is meant to serve as a rite of passage experience for the graduating senior class within the context of the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church. The rite of passage element was designed based on Brett Stephenson’s research on the importance of rite of passages experiences through his book *From Boys to Men: Spiritual Rites of Passage in an Indulgent Age*. The process of formulating and sharing one’s own experiences as a rite of passage was loosely designed based on the Jewish practices of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as explored in Rabbi Goldie Milgram’s guide to such ceremonies titled *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Spiritual Rite of Passage*. The importance of rites of passage and rituals in faith development is also seen in the *Growing Young* study.

### End of First Semester Follow Up

During Christmas break of after the first semester of college, the students who participated in the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship process at MBBC will have a one-on-one follow-up interview with the researcher. The following questions will be asked:

- How have you seen your own understanding of your own story of faith change/grow in your first semester of college?
- How have you seen God work in your life this semester?
- Have you had an opportunity to share your faith with others? If so, what happened?
- How has your faith impacted your life/decisions into college/career?
- Do you feel like your faith foundation has well equipped you? Why?

The goal of this interview will be to assess how the student’s understanding of how their faith impacts their decisions and life into college/career has changed after experiencing a semester in college/career. The interview will also seek to assess if the articulation and understanding of their own story gained through the discipleship process became a foundation to help guide them in the choices and life decisions that they made the first semester.

### Conclusion

Through the “This is My Story” teaching series and the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship model, students will be able to both grow in their understanding of the power of their story not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others. Through

processing their own story, they will be able to better see how God has shaped them and will be reminded that he is the God who will be forever faithful to them.

## **CHAPTER 5 OUTCOMES**

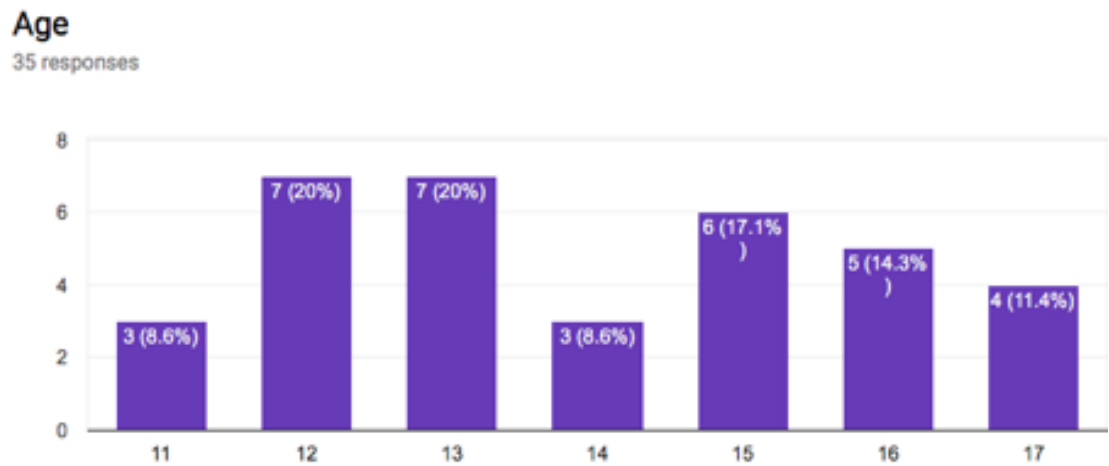
### **Outcomes**

In seeking to determine “How can we help students form their own faith by identifying spiritual markers in their spiritual journeys and help them to understand their testimony as an ongoing work of God in their lives?” a two-layered research method is employed. The first phase of this research method is the “This Is My Story” teaching series, which includes a two-questionnaire approach and a follow-up interview with an outside researcher. This phase also includes both a primary test group with the students of MBBC and a secondary test group with the students of IVC. The second phase is the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship module, includes a tool for processing senior’s stories at MBBC as well as an interview regarding their story and how they present it.

### **“This Is My Story” Teaching Series for MBBC**

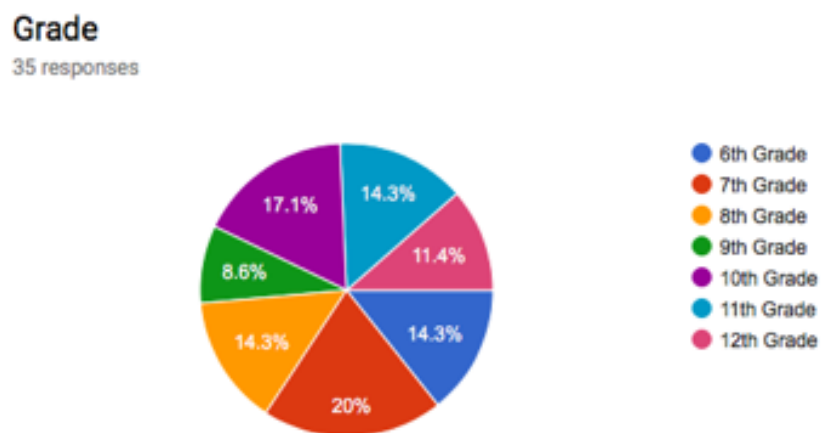
At the beginning of the “This Is My Story” teaching series for MBBC, a questionnaire was distributed to students regarding their own personal understanding of testimony and its relevancy to their lives. The beginning survey was completed by a total of 35 students. The students who completed the survey’s age distribution was:

**Figure 2. MBBC Initial Survey Age Distribution.**



Their grade distribution was:

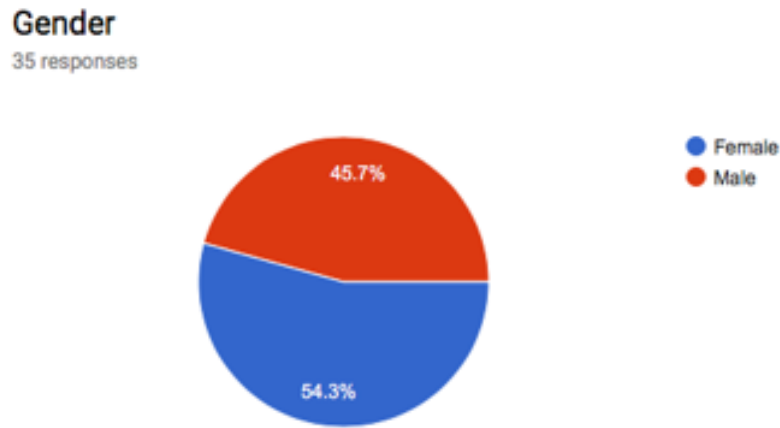
**Figure 3. MBBC Initial Survey Grade Distribution.**





Their gender distribution was:

**Figure 4. MBBC Initial Survey Gender Distribution.**



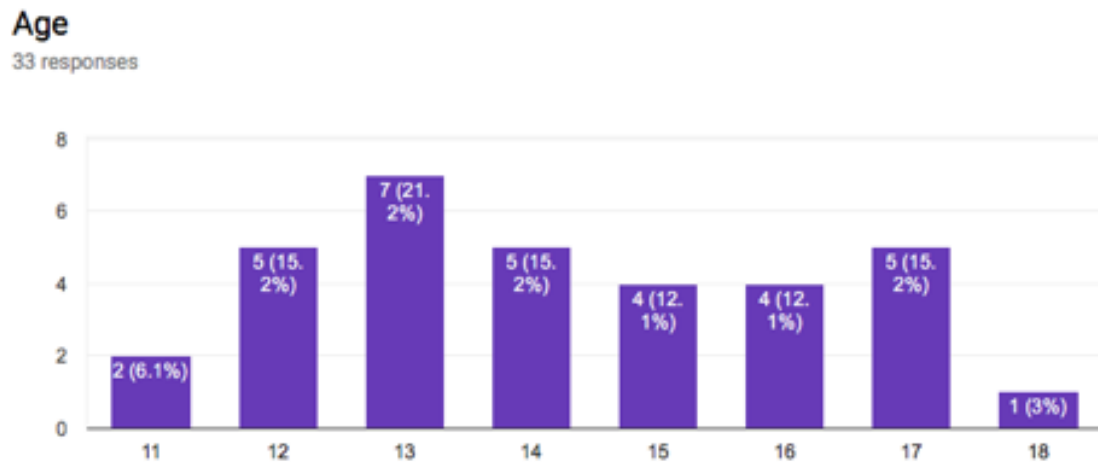
Of the 35 surveyed on the questionnaire at the beginning of the series, the students were all white in race. This statistic reflects the overall demographics of both the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church and the community in which the church is located.<sup>1</sup>

At the conclusion of the “This Is My Story” teaching series, a questionnaire was distributed to students regarding their own understanding of testimony and its relevancy to their lives as well as some qualitative questions regarding how their understandings of testimony had changed through the series. The concluding survey was completed by a total of 33 students. The students who completed the survey’s age distribution was:

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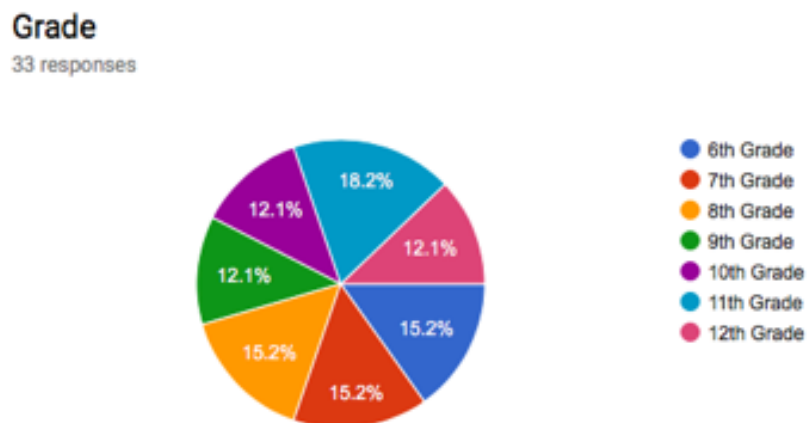
<sup>1</sup> This is further explored in chapter 1.

**Figure 5. MBBC Concluding Survey Age Distribution.**



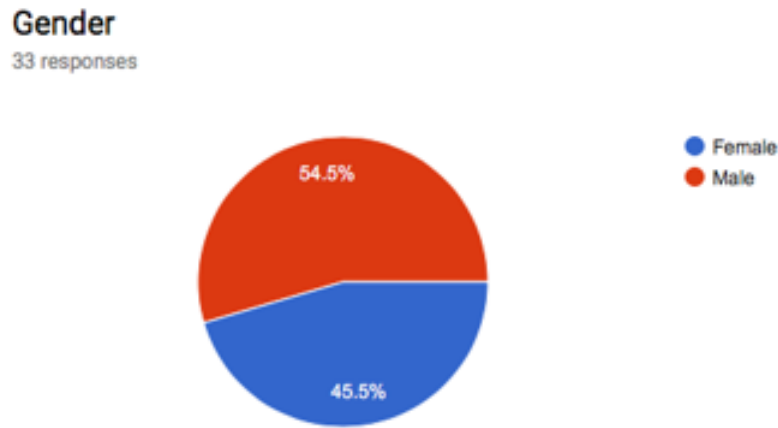
Their grade distribution was:

**Figure 6. MBBC Concluding Survey Grade Distribution.**



Their gender distribution was:

**Figure 7. MBBC Concluding Survey Gender Distribution.**



Of the 33 respondents to the second survey, 32 were white and 1 was Asian.

The questionnaire then shifted to the students' years involved in a church and years involved at Meadow Brook Baptist. From the beginning of the series questionnaire, 32 of the 35 responses indicated that students had been in a church for their entire lives, with some students choosing to note instead of a number the responses of "my life" or "forever." The 3 outlying responses were 3 years, 7 years, and 10 years. From the conclusion of the series questionnaire, 30 of the 33 responses indicated that students had been in a church for their entire lives, with some students choosing to note instead of a number the responses of "all of them," "forever," "whole life" (2 responses), "since baby," and "all." The 3 outlying responses were 3 years and 8 years (2 responses). Two respondents did not answer this question. These responses reflect the demographic of the Southern United States where most people attend or claim connection with a church body for the majority of their lives. Christian belief and church is something that has merely folded into the fabric of this community.

In response to the years of involvement at Meadow Brook Baptist Church, 8 of the 35 respondents to the beginning questionnaire had been at the church for their entire lives. The other 27 respondents were on the following ranges of years at Meadow Brook Baptist:

**Table 3. MBBC Initial Survey Years at MBBC Responses**

Years at MBBC	Responses
1-3 Years	4
4-6 Years	7
7-9 Years	10
10+ Years	4
No Response/Blank	1

In response to the concluding questionnaire, 8 of the 33 respondents had been at Meadow Brook Baptist Church for their entire lives. The other 25 respondents were on the following ranges of years at Meadow Brook Baptist:

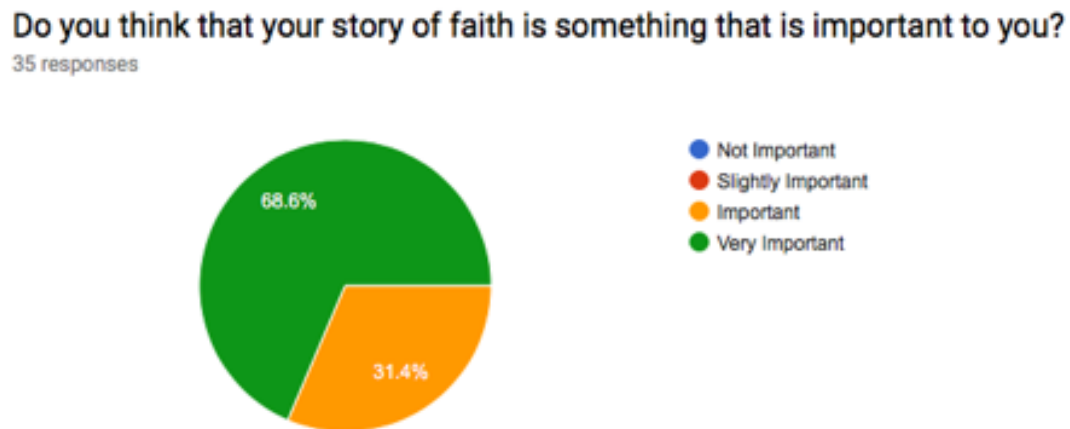
**Table 4. MBBC Initial Survey Years at MBBC Responses**

Years at MBBC	Responses
1-3 Years	1
4-6 Years	10
7-9 Years	5
10+ Years	6
No Response/Blank	3

Though a large portion of the students surveyed (between 23% and 30%) have been at Meadow Brook Baptist Church their entire lives, the rest of the students have also been involved for many years. These statistics point to the idea that Meadow Brook Baptist Church remains a stable church where families come and stay for the long-term, yet the statistics also point to a lack of reaching and engaging new families into the life of the church.

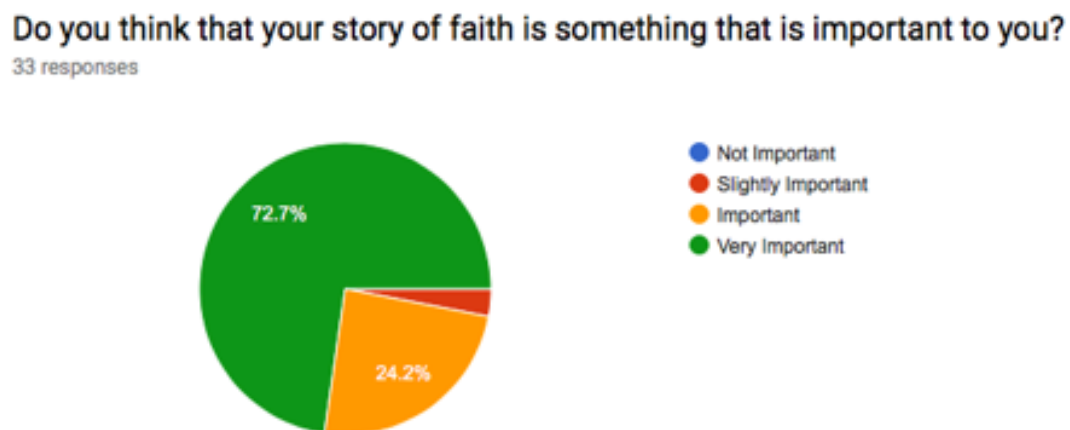
The first question on the questionnaire was “Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you?” The beginning of the series questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 8. MBBC Initial Survey Question 1 Responses.**



The concluding questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 9. MBBC Concluding Survey Question 1 Responses.**

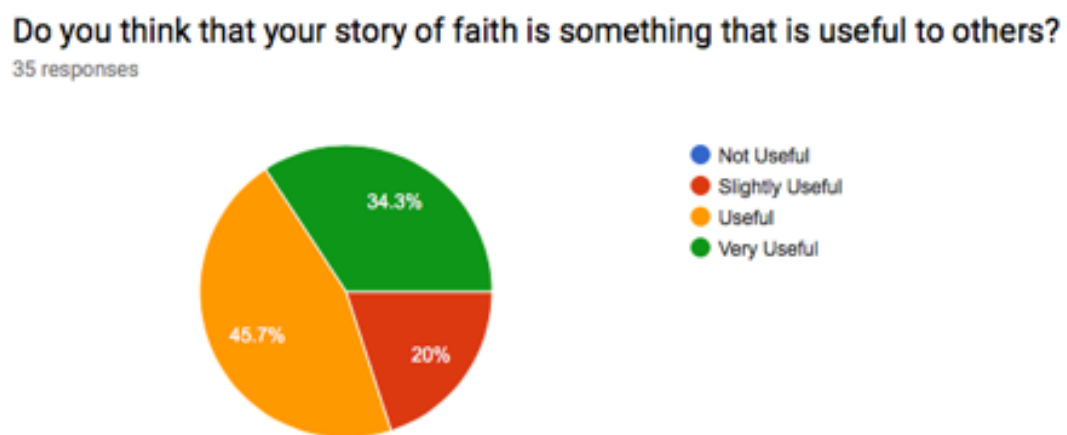


In surveying the data from this question, there was a slight increase on the “very important” response (from 68.6% to 72.7%). This increase shows a slight change in greater understanding within the group surveyed of the importance of their own story of

faith. This is an encouraging figure in that after hearing stories of faith in others student's own story of faith became more important to them.

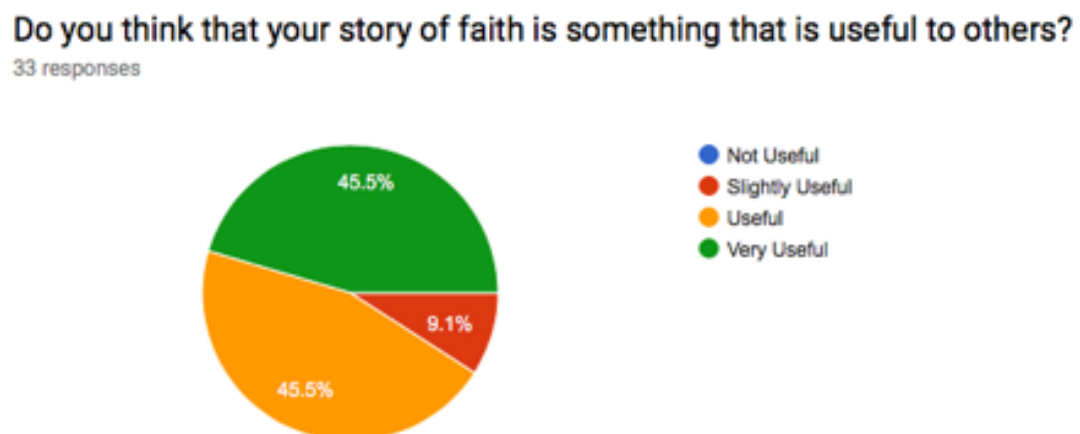
The second question on the questionnaire is “Do you think that your story of faith is something useful to others?” The beginning of the series questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 10. MBBC Initial Survey Question 2 Responses.**



The concluding questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 11. MBBC Concluding Survey Question 2 Responses.**



In surveying the data from this question, there was an increase on the “very useful” response (from 34.3% to 45.5%) as well as a significant decrease in the “slightly useful” response (from 20% to 9.1%). This overall increase usefulness shows a greater understanding within the group surveyed of the importance of their own story of faith to others. This is an encouraging figure because after hearing stories of other’s faith a student began to see that their own story of faith is something that could also have an impact on the lives of other people.

The third question on the questionnaire was “How is it useful to others?” Students were given the options of “encouraging to others for strengthening their faith,” “evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus,” and a blank for other options. Students were allowed to select as many ways as they wish to indicate how they understood one’s story of faith to be useful to others. The results for the beginning questionnaire are as follows:

- Encouraging to others for strengthening their faith. - 82.9% (29 responses)
- Evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus. - 54.3% (19 responses)
- Response(s) involving sharing their story with others.- 14.5% (5 responses)
- Response(s) involving inviting someone to church.- 5.8% (2 responses)
- Response(s) involving connecting their struggles and story to others.- 5.8% (2 responses)

The results for the concluding questionnaire were as follows:

- Encouraging to others for strengthening their faith. - 84.8% (28 responses)
- Evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus. - 51.5% (17 responses)

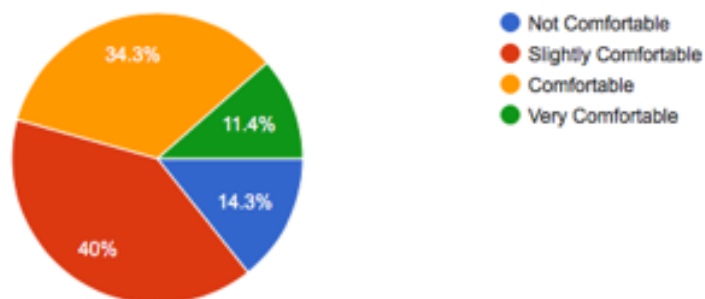
- Response(s) involving sharing their story with others and gaining credibility.- 9% (3 responses)
- Response(s) involving connecting their struggles and story to others.- 6% (2 responses)

From the data from question 3, the answers given for the “other” blank shifted from bringing someone to church to gaining credibility in sharing their own story with others. These answers show a subtle shift from a faith commitment of bringing a friend to an event at church to hear the gospel to students seeking to have a more active role in sharing the gospel with their friends themselves. This change shows a greater ownership of students in understanding their own story, their story’s power, and God’s mission for them to go and tell others about what God has done in their own lives.

The fourth question in the questionnaire is “How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?” The results from the beginning questionnaire are as follows:

**Figure 12. MBBC Initial Survey Question 4 Responses.**

**How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?**  
35 responses

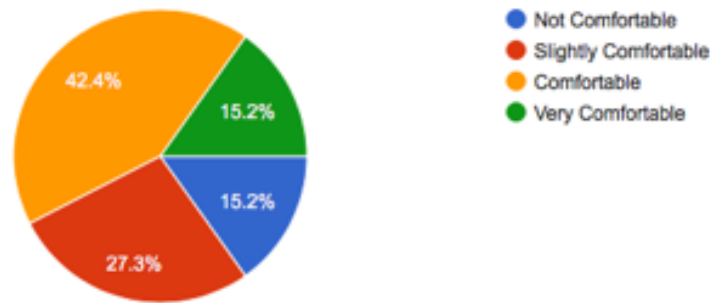




The results from the concluding questionnaire are:

**Figure 13. MBBC Concluding Survey Question 4 Responses.**

**How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?**  
33 responses



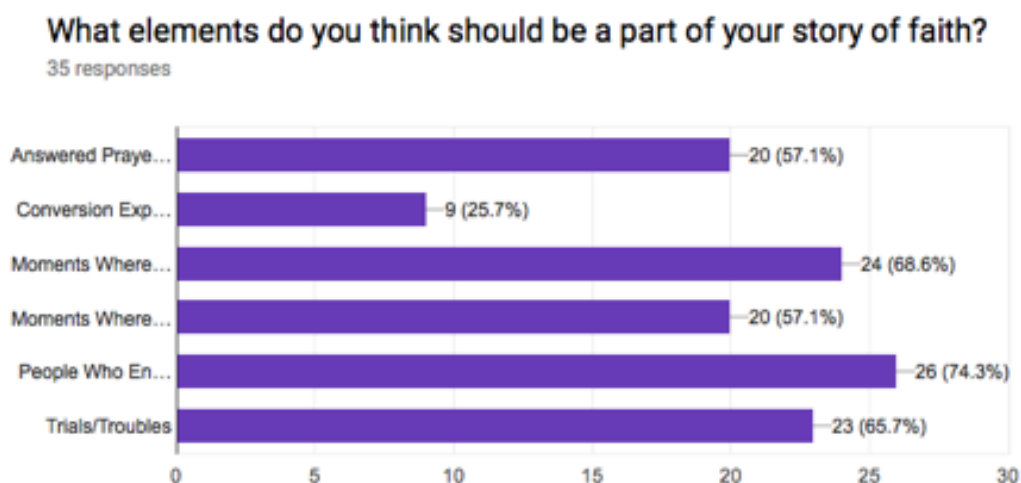
In surveying the data from this question, there was an increase on the “very comfortable” response (from 11.4% to 15.2%) as well as an increase in the “comfortable” response (from 34.3% to 42.4%). The “not comfortable” response was very similar in both questionnaires (from 14.3% to 15.2%). The increase in comfortability for students who already had a slight comfort level in sharing their faith shows that the students surveyed were encouraged and challenged to be bolder in sharing their faith because of the “This Is My Story” series. Those students who had no comfort level with sharing their faith seemed to not be affected by the series. It is interesting that in a small portion of the sample size that this who were not comfortable grew. These factors may point to the fact that introverted and extroverted personalities and comfortability in social situations is a strong determining factor in students sharing their story with others. Students who are already open to the idea of sharing their story can be encouraged to actually take steps to do that while other students will not respond to that encouragement due to greater factors and concerns in their own life and story.

The fifth and final quantitative question on the questionnaire is “What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith?” Students were instructed to select one or more of the following answers:

- Answered Prayer Requests
- Conversion Experience
- Moments Where You Felt God’s Presence
- Moments Where You Felt God Used You
- People Who Encouraged You
- Trials/Troubles

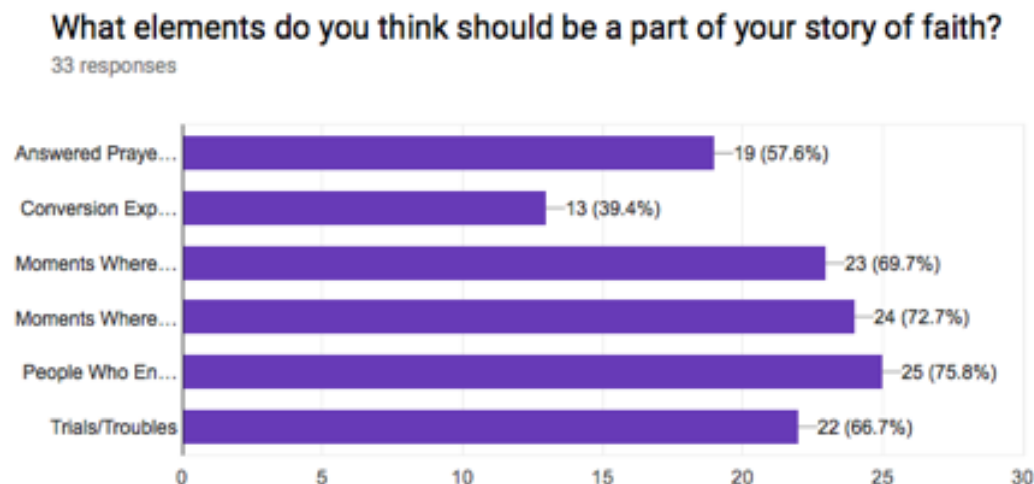
The beginning questionnaire respondents produced the following results:

**Figure 14. MBBC Initial Survey Question 5 Responses.**



The concluding questionnaire resulted in the following:

**Figure 16. MBBC Concluding Survey Question 5 Responses.**



The slight increase in selecting “conversion experiences” may be due to a lack of understanding regarding what that term meant from students on the first questionnaire. One respondent noted on the concluding survey that “conversion experience” could mean “accepting Jesus or switching from another religion.” If the researcher was able to go back and change the question, he would have used a term that was less confusing to students. Another respondent made a note next to the “conversion experience,” which said “but this is not the bulk of the story.” This was one of the central teachings and main ideas of the “This Is My Story” teaching series so it is encouraging to see this student understanding what is being communicated. The slight decrease in “moments where God used you” is interesting since that theme, along with all the other themes in this list, were all things that were highlighted by different speakers through the “This Is My Story” teaching series. The overall lack of a significant change in the data could be due to students seeking to select what they would consider to be the right answers rather than their own personal experience with the elements of testimony. A more open-ended

question might have produced a different result from the first survey to the second due to students having to wrestle with and articulate the elements of their own story while answering the question. If the researcher was to give this survey again, the more open-ended format would be used for this question.

The concluding questionnaire to the “This Is My Story” teaching series contained two additional qualitative questions. The first qualitative question is “How has hearing someone’s story of faith impacted you?” Here are some of the responses:

- “Everyone’s story is different and all are impactful. I thought my story was bland and stereotypical, but I’m very unique” (Junior Female)
- “Stories are inspirational. They cause people to have new found inspiration in their lives.” (Junior Male)
- “It has shown me that not all Christians are the same. God uses people in a multitude of ways and teaches people the lessons he thinks we need most. It’s also encouraging hearing someone’s story and knowing God is with me through everything and he is using me in ways I don’t understand.” (Sophomore Female)
- “It’s just so cool hearing how someone went from death to life! It’s also encouraging in my faith and a reminder of how awesome God is.” (Junior Female)
- “It has made me realize what an impact God can have on you, and how much faith can guide you during trials and tribulations.” (Freshman Female)
- “It really showed me how powerful God really is and how he can use everyday people in impactful ways.” (Seventh Grade Female)
- “It encouraged me to share my story with others.” (Senior Female)

- “It’s encouraged me and made me realize people have bigger trouble than I do.”  
(Freshman Male)
- “Makes me want to share mine.” (Eighth Grade Female)
- “Encouraged me to make my own story.” (Eighth Grade Male)
- “It was near hearing the story of people I see (or at least used to see) everyday. It showed me that even those in your everyday life have a unique story.” (Senior Male)
- “How much of an impact God can make.” (Freshman Female)
- “Hearing other people’s stories was amazing and eye-opening. God works in people’s lives in different ways.” (Eighth Grade Female)
- “It has shown me that people who were older than me still relate with me and went through similar trials.” (Senior Male)
- “Hearing other people’s story showed me that we as humans have a lot of the same problems and questions.” (Eighth Grade Female)
- “Giving a real-life example helped me understand more about faith.” (Senior Male)

Through the “This Is My Story” series, students began to understand that everyone has a unique story, yet many people face similar challenges. They also began to understand what faith looks like lived in the context of real life. Students were encouraged to see their lives as ordinary lives that could be used for great things in the hands of a great God. As the students heard stories, they were impacted to both share their own story and to live a compelling faith story by seeking to faithfully follow Jesus.

The final qualitative question on the concluding questionnaire is “How can you use your story of faith to impact others?” Here are some of the responses:

- “Help show that God never leaves even during extended times of hardship.” (Junior Male)
- “I can encourage Christians in their walk, show them what God has taught me, and possibly bring people to Christ.” (Sophomore Female)
- “Well I love God, and I hope that my story shows people how that love has affected me.” (Junior Female)
- “I can simply share it with others, and even though nothing really bad happened to guide me to Jesus just the fact that I am a Christian can make someone ask or want to learn more.” (Freshman Female)
- “By telling them how God helps you when you need help.” (Sixth Grade Male)
- “I’ve been through some troubles that could help others that might be going through the same thing.” (Sixth Grade Female)
- “Sharing with others what God has done in my life, the people he has put in my life who have opened my eyes, sharing the gospel with others, and helping others grow in their faith and them helping me grow in mine.” (Eighth Grade Female)
- “I can show people that my sin does not define me, but it is Jesus that took the sin from me that tells others who I am.” (Senior Male)
- “I can use my story of faith to encourage people to always trust in God no matter what life throws at you.” (Eighth Grade Female)
- “I can use my story by showing them that God is a real miracle and that he will show you the right way to be. You just have to keep your eyes open.” (Junior Female)

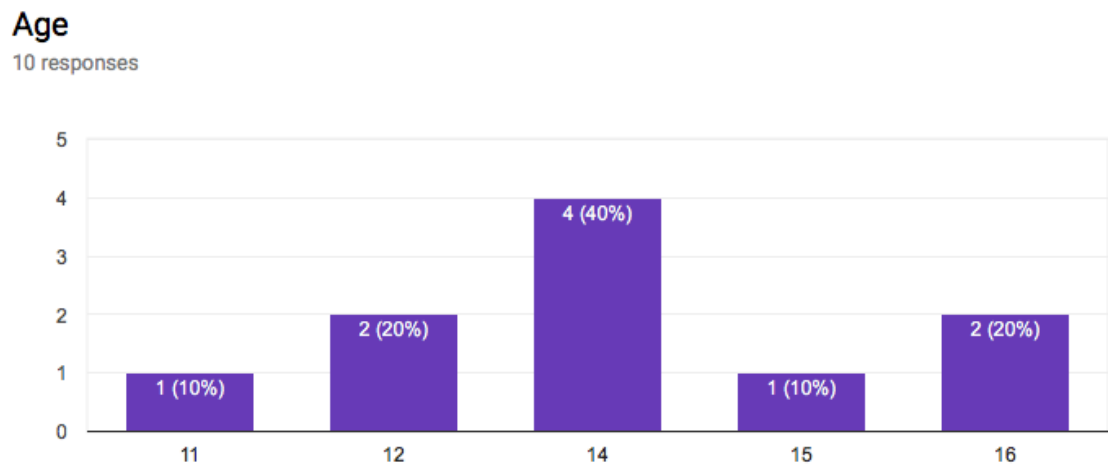
Through these responses, students are clearly beginning to process how their own story of faith can make an impact on others. These answers bring encouragement to the researcher

that students are willing to process their own next steps and allow the truths they heard to become tangible truths that they can now go live.

### **“This Is My Story” Teaching Series for IVC**

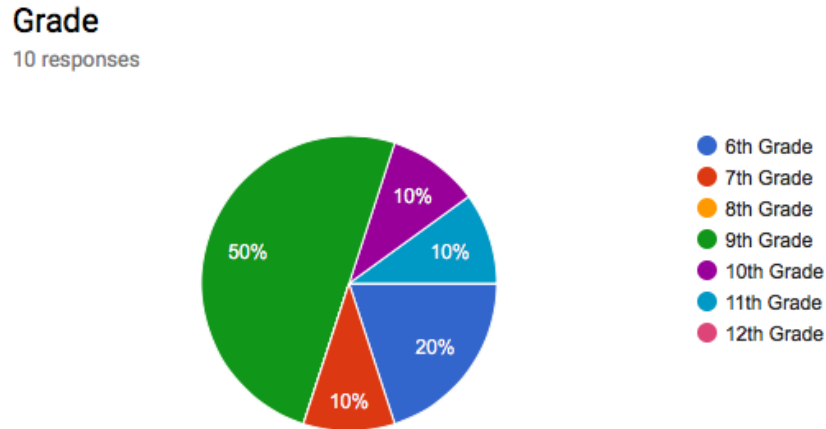
At the beginning of the “This Is My Story” teaching series for IVC, the same questionnaire was distributed to students regarding their own personal understanding of testimony and its relevancy to their lives. The beginning survey was completed by a total of 10 students. The students who completed the survey’s age distribution was:

**Figure 16. IVC Initial Survey Age Distribution.**



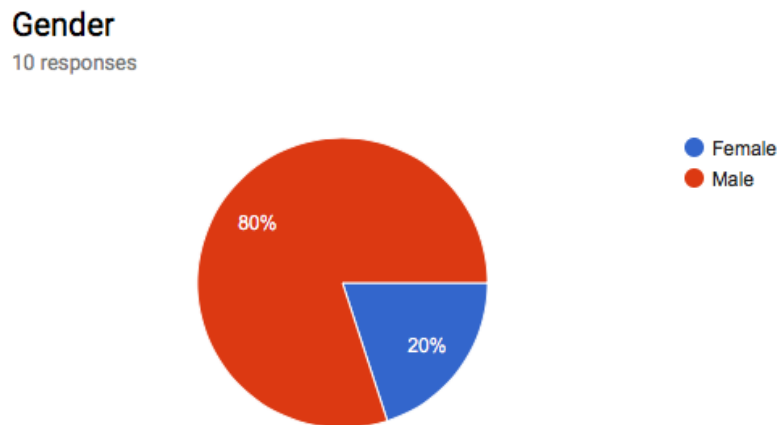
Their grade distribution was:

**Figure 17. IVC Initial Survey Grade Distribution.**



Their gender distribution was:

**Figure 18. IVC Initial Survey Gender Distribution.**



Of the 10 surveyed on the questionnaire at the beginning of the series, the students were from the following races:

- White- 70% (7 Respondents)
- African American- 10% (1 Respondent)

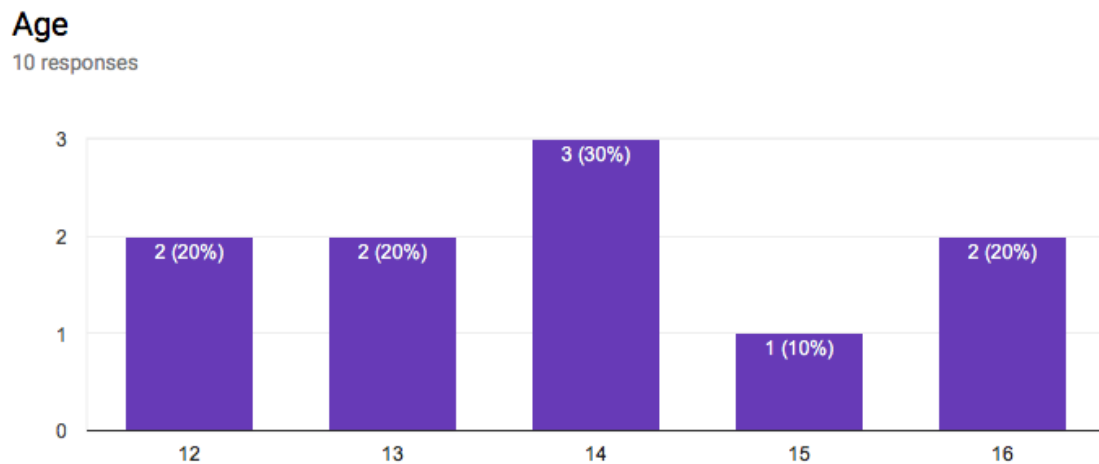


- Asian- 10% (1 Respondent)
- Other- 10% (1 Respondent)

This reflects the racial diversity of IVC,<sup>2</sup> which stands in contrast to the sample of students surveyed from MBBC.

At the conclusion of the “This Is My Story” teaching series at IVC, a questionnaire was distributed to students regarding their own understanding of testimony and its relevancy to their lives as well as some qualitative questions regarding how their understandings of testimony had changed through the series. The concluding survey was completed by a total of 10 students. The students who completed the survey’s age distribution was:

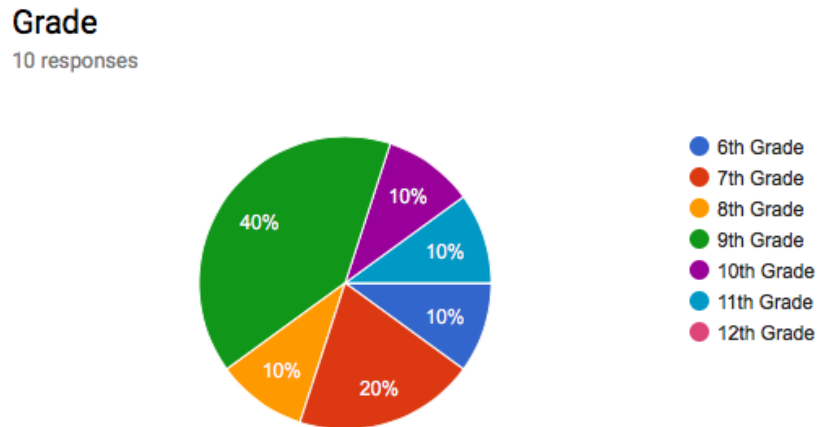
**Figure 19. IVC Concluding Survey Age Distribution.**



<sup>2</sup> See chapter 1 for more information about the racial demographic of IVC.

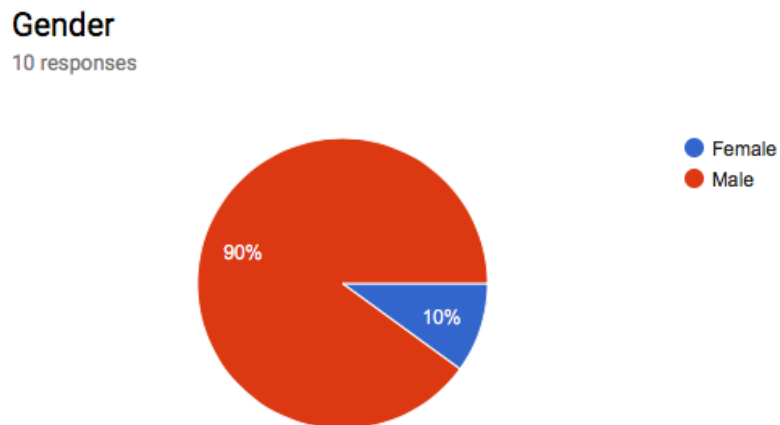
Their grade distribution was:

**Figure 20. IVC Concluding Survey Grade Distribution.**



Their gender distribution was:

**Figure 21. IVC Concluding Survey Gender Distribution.**



Of the 10 respondents to the second survey, the racial breakdown remained the same as the first survey with the following results:

- White- 70% (7 Respondents)
- African American- 10% (1 Respondent)

- Asian- 10% (1 Respondent)
- Other- 10% (1 Respondent)

The questionnaire then shifted to the students' years involved in a church and years involved at Inverness Vineyard Church. From the beginning of the series questionnaire, 8 of the 10 responses indicated that students had been in a church for their entire lives, with some students choosing to note instead of a number the responses of "my whole life" or "forever." The 2 outlying responses were 7 years and 12 years. From the conclusion of the series questionnaire, 9 of the 10 responses indicated that students had been in a church for their entire lives, with some students choosing to note instead of a number the responses of "all of my life," "all of them," and "whole life," The single outlying response was 7 years. Just like with the MBBC results, these responses also reflect the demographic of the Southern United States where most people attend or claim connection with a church body for the majority of their lives and where Christian belief and church is something that has folded into the fabric of this community.

In response to the years of involvement at Inverness Vineyard Church, 6 of the 10 respondents to the beginning questionnaire had been at the church for their entire lives. The other 4 respondents were on the following ranges of years at Inverness Vineyard Church:

**Table 6. IVC Initial Survey Years at IVC Responses**

Years at IVC	Responses
1-3 Years	0
4-6 Years	1
7-9 Years	2
10+ Years	1
No Response/Blank	0

In response to the concluding questionnaire, 5 of the 10 respondents had been at Inverness Vineyard Church for their entire lives. The other 5 respondents were on the following ranges of years at Inverness Vineyard Church:

**Table 7. IVC Concluding Survey Years at IVC Responses**

Years at IVC	Responses
1-3 Years	0
4-6 Years	0
7-9 Years	4
10+ Years	1
No Response/Blank	0

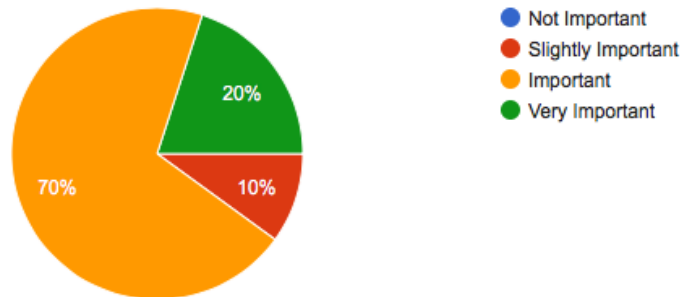
Though over half of the students surveyed (between 60% and 50%) have been at Inverness Vineyard Church their entire lives, the rest of the students have also been involved for many years. All of the students surveyed have had an opportunity to engage with the discipleship processes and teachings of both the elementary and student ministries of IVC.

The first question on the questionnaire was “Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you?” The beginning of the series questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 22. IVC Initial Survey Question 1 Responses.**

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you?**

10 responses

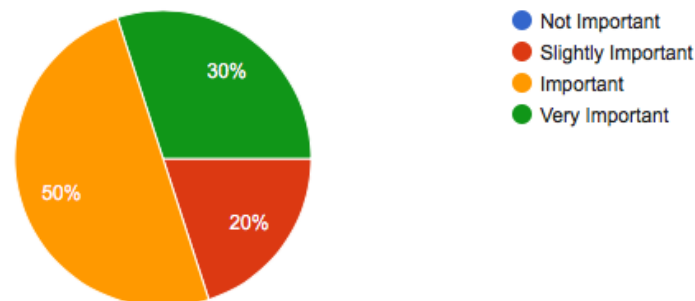


The concluding questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 23. IVC Concluding Survey Question 1 Responses.**

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you?**

10 responses



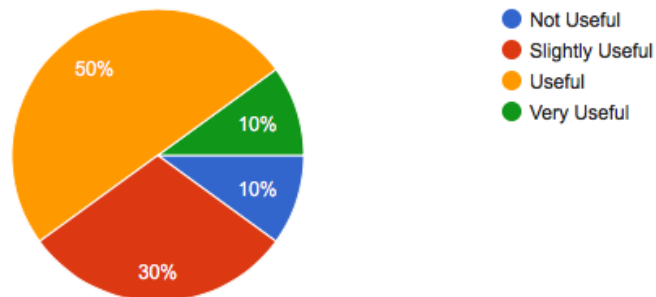
In surveying the data from this question, there was a slight increase on the “very important” response (from 20% to 30%) while there was also a slight decrease on the “important” response (from 70% to 50%) and an increase on the “slightly important” response (from 10% to 20%). This slight increase and corresponding slight decreases

show that with the smaller sample size of the IVC survey group that one student's shift in response has a greater effect on the overall data.

The second question on the questionnaire is “Do you think that your story of faith is something useful to others?” The beginning of the series questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 24. IVC Initial Survey Question 2 Responses.**

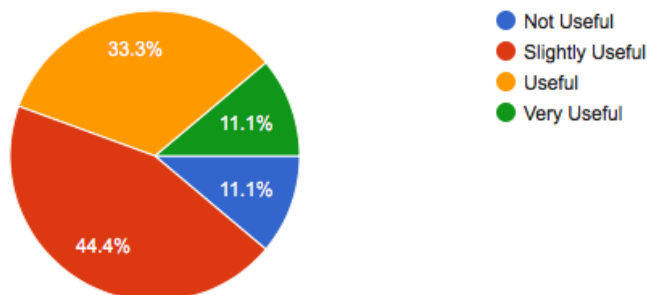
Do you think that your story of faith is something that is useful to others?  
10 responses



The concluding questionnaire showed the following responses:

**Figure 25. IVC Concluding Survey Question 2 Responses.**

Do you think that your story of faith is something that is useful to others?  
9 responses



In surveying the data from this question, there was a slight increase on the “very useful” and “not useful” responses (from 10% to 11.1%) as well as a decrease from the response of “useful” (from 50% to 44.4%) with a corresponding increase in the “slightly useful” response (from 30% to 44.4%). These shifts are due to one person for the second survey skipping this question. After factoring out the unanswered question, leads to a decrease of two student response from the “useful” response and one addition to the “slightly useful” response. This shows a shift in a single student’s understanding decreasing the usefulness of testimony. This could be due to the fact that the shorter series at IVC did not have the impact that the longer series of “This Is My Story” did at MBBC.

The third question on the questionnaire was “How is it useful to others?” Students were given the options of “encouraging to others for strengthening their faith,” “evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus,” and a blank for other options. Students were allowed to select as many ways as they wish to indicate how they understood one’s story of faith to be useful to others. The results for the beginning questionnaire are as follows:

- Encouraging to others for strengthening their faith.- 80% (8 responses)
- Evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus.- 60% (6 responses)
- “Shows that going to church doesn’t make you a Christian.”- 10% (1 response)
- “I feel more confident knowing what I believe in, which helps me help others.”- 10% (1 response)
- “It inspires them to do something.”- 10% (1 response)
- “It encourages others to follow and make their story.”- 10% (1 response)

- “Not important from an apologetics stand point because you cannot give them that experience and they won’t believe you.”- 10% (1 response)

The results for the concluding questionnaire were as follows:

- Encouraging to others for strengthening their faith. - 60% (6 responses)
- Evangelism tool for those who don’t know Jesus. - 60% (6 responses)
- “Shows that going to church doesn’t make you a Christian.”- 10% (1 response)
- “Helping them with their faith and to become a believer.”- 10% (1 response)
- “It’s not.”- 10% (1 response)

From the data from question 3, the answers given for the “other” blank stayed fairly similar in responses. This could be due to the fact that due to the shorter series at IVC students may have remembered responses to this question thus the similar “other” responses for the question. Like the elements of a testimony survey at MBBC, making this question more open ended would have possibly allowed for more variables in answers, which could possibly show a greater understanding of the uses for testimony.

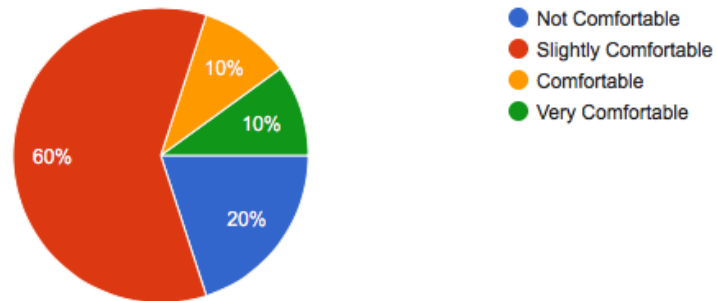
The fourth question in the questionnaire is “How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?” The results from the beginning questionnaire are as follows:



**Figure 26. IVC Initial Survey Question 4 Responses.**

How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?

10 responses

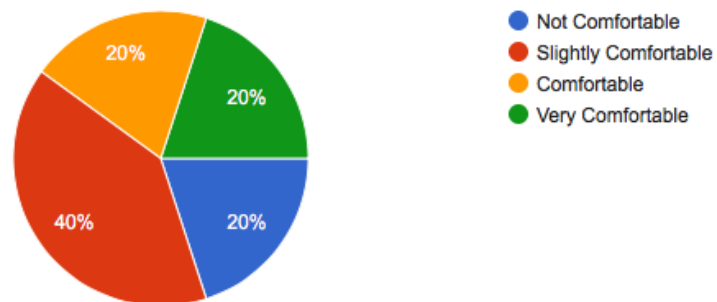


The results from the concluding questionnaire are:

**Figure 27. IVC Concluding Survey Question 4 Responses.**

How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others?

10 responses



In surveying the data from this question, there was an increase on the “very comfortable” response (from 10% to 20%) as well as an increase in the “comfortable” response (from 10% to 20%). The “not comfortable” response was the same in both questionnaires (20%). The increase in comfortability for students who already had a slight comfort level in sharing their faith shows that the students surveyed were encouraged and challenged to

be bolder in sharing their faith because of the “This Is My Story” series. Those students who had no comfort level with sharing their faith seemed to not be affected by the series. Similar to the MBBC survey data, these factors may point to the fact that introverted and extroverted personalities and comfortability in social situations is a strong determining factor in students sharing their story with others. Students who are already open to the idea of sharing their story can be encouraged to actually take steps to do that while other students will not respond to that encouragement due to greater factors and concerns in their own life and story.

The fifth and final quantitative question on the questionnaire is “What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith?” Students were instructed to select one or more of the following answers:

- Answered Prayer Requests
- Conversion Experience
- Moments Where You Felt God’s Presence
- Moments Where You Felt God Used You
- People Who Encouraged You
- Trials/Troubles

The beginning questionnaire respondents produced the following results:

- Answered Prayer Requests- 40% (4 responses)
- Conversion Experience- 50% (5 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God’s Presence- 70% (7 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God Used You- 60% (6 responses)
- People Who Encouraged You- 70% (7 responses)

- Trials/Troubles- 90% (9 responses)

The concluding questionnaire resulted in the following:

- Answered Prayer Requests- 33.3% (3 responses)
- Conversion Experience- 55.6% (5 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God's Presence- 33.3% (3 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God Used You- 66.7% (6 responses)
- People Who Encouraged You- 88.9% (8 responses)
- Trials/Troubles- 88.9% (8 responses)

The slight increase in selecting “conversion experiences” may be due to a lack of understanding regarding what that term meant from students on the first questionnaire.

The slight decrease in “moments where you felt God's presence” is interesting since the theme of feeling God and experiencing his presence is frequently mentioned in the IVC student interviews.<sup>3</sup>

The concluding questionnaire to the “This Is My Story” teaching series contained two additional qualitative questions. The first qualitative question is “How has hearing someone's story of faith impacted you?” Here are some of the responses:

- “Inspired me.” (Eighth Grade Male)
- “It helped to encourage me in my walk.” (Freshman Male)
- “I learned that I need to live all out, because I don't have much time in this world and neither do others.” (Junior Male)
- “It shows me new things that I could use in my faith story.” (Seventh Grade Male)

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<sup>3</sup> This theme will be explored further in the student interview section of the chapter.

- “It has caused me to realize how much God has done for others, and how much He has in store for me.” (Freshman Male)
- “I can relate. I feel not alone.” (Freshman Female)
- “It encouraged me.” (Freshman Male)
- “It has inspired me to do better.” (Sophomore Male)

Through the “This Is My Story” series, students gained a greater understanding of their own stories of faith and the faithfulness of God in the lives of others. Just like with the MBBC group, the IVC group experienced the power of personal narrative to inspire, encourage, and help shape a student’s own faith story.

The final qualitative question on the concluding questionnaire is “How can you use your story of faith to impact others?” Here are some of the responses:

- “I can tell how God helped me in dark times.” (Eighth Grade Male)
- “It can help to open the eyes of others, maybe. Let’s do this thing.” (Freshman Male)
- “I can use it to encourage others.” (Junior Male)
- “I can show people about God.” (Seventh Grade Male)
- “I can influence them by my story.” (Sixth Grade Male)
- “I can use it to tell of God’s faithfulness, love, and plan for my life and tell them that God wants to do the same for them.” (Freshman Male)
- “Share it with others to help them with theirs.” (Seventh Grade Male)
- “You can give people faith.” (Freshman Male)
- “I can inspire others with my story.” (Sophomore Male)

Through these responses, students are clearly beginning to process how their own story of faith can make an impact on others to inspire them, encourage their faith, and point them to Jesus.

The “This Is My Story” teaching series was successful in that it helped expand student’s views of testimony to not merely be a transactional conversion experience and views of the Christian life as an ongoing walking with God throughout all of life. It also helped to encourage them both with their own growth in understanding of and comfortability with sharing their own story of faith with others. The practical ideas generated by these questionnaires allowed students to develop their own practical and personal ways to share their story with others.

### **Follow Up Interviews for MBBC**

The “This Is My Story” teaching series ended with some follow up interviews to further explore students own understanding of and ability to articulate their story of faith. These interviews were done by an outside researcher and were audio recorded to be processed by the researcher. Throughout these interviews, students were asked to share their faith story, to share about the opportunities that they had been given to share that faith story with others, and to share how their faith story impacts their daily life. The MBBC interviews consisted of 24 students. Of the elements taught as components of a faith story throughout the “This Is My Story” series and outlined in the surveys with the series, the MBBC students had the following items in each of their stories:

- Answered Prayer Requests- 0% (no responses)
- Conversion Experience- 83.3% (20 responses)

- Moments Where You Felt God’s Presence- 37.5% (9 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God Used You- 4.2% (1 response)
- People Who Encouraged You- 100% (24 responses)
- Trials/Troubles- 41.7% (10 responses)

From the above data, the role of others in one’s own understanding of and growth in faith stands out as a constant in personal narratives followed by a conversion experience, the role of a trial or trouble in the shaping of one’s faith story, and the moments where a student felt God’s presence. With one of the goals of the “This Is My Story” series being that students would begin to see their own faith story as more than a transactional encounter with God, these interviews tend to point that this is still a major element in one’s story of faith, which it should be, but also other elements are beginning to influence this understanding as well.

Moving to the question involving the opportunity for students to share their own faith story, the MBBC student data reflected the following:

- Students who had an opportunity to share and further explained their experience sharing.- 91.7% (22 responses)
- Students who simply answered “yes” with no further explanation. – 0% (no responses)
- Students who answered “no” that they hadn’t had an opportunity to share.- 8.3% (2 responses)

From the results of this question, the majority of the students interviewed from MBBC had shared their faith story with someone else. Of the two that had not, one student noted that he was “too nervous to do it,” which points to the role of some personality types and their willingness to engage in what could be challenging conversations.

The final interview question asked students “How has understanding your own story of faith helped you in your life?” From the MBBC students interviewed, the answers fell in the following categories:

- God’s presence with me. – 50% (12 responses)
- God’s provision for me and my family. – 8.3% (2 responses)
- Faith makes me a better person/causes me to make better decisions. – 37.5% (9 responses)
- Feel different because of my salvation. – 8.3% (2 responses)
- Impacts how I live before others as an example. – 20.8% (5 responses)
- Seeking God through spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible study). – 33.3% (8 responses)
- Being active in church/Christian organizations to grow spiritually. – 8.3% (2 responses)

For the MBBC students surveyed, God’s presence with them throughout the day, faith helping to make them a better person and make better decisions, and seeking God through spiritual disciplines defined how their story of faith is worked out in everyday life.

From listening to the 24 student interviews from MBBC, some general observations can be made. First, the term “story of faith” is understood by some students still as simply a conversion narrative while others see it as current experiences of faith. This shift in terminology within the student ministry at MBBC from the idea of a testimony being a single experience with God for salvation to the “story of faith” being the ongoing work of God in one’s life is going to take some time. Further research could be done to determine if there is a better word that can be used to communicate the ongoing work of God besides both of these terms. Second, the general ideas of Moralistic

Therapeutic Deism (MTD)<sup>4</sup> come up multiple times in multiple ways throughout the interviews. This shows both the pervasive false understandings of God that exist even in churches where the Bible is taught and the gospel is put at the center of teaching. This points to an area of growth that is clearly still needed in our church and student's own discipleship. Third, throughout the interviews, students presented flawed views of baptism as being the moment of salvation rather than a next step after salvation of showing the world that you are now a follower of Jesus. This is another additional area where students have a misunderstanding of a truth that has been taught. Fourth, many students at MBBC pointed to a discipleship class that the children's minister at MBBC does for children with questions about salvation as an important moment in their stories of faith. This class could be a possible source of the frequent terminology throughout the interviews of the gospel being framed in light of the "ABCs,"<sup>5</sup> "praying the prayer," and "asking Jesus into your heart." Further research could include looking at the curriculum taught in this class to see what elements of a student's understanding of the gospel and baptism point back to this class.

### **Follow Up Interviews for IVC**

The "This Is My Story" teaching series ended also at IVC with some follow up interviews to further explore students own understanding of and ability to articulate their story of faith. Just as the MBBC group, these interviews were done by an outside researcher and were audio recorded to be processed by the researcher. Throughout these

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<sup>4</sup> For more on MTD see Christian Smith's research in chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> The ABC's are an acrostic memory tool to teach the plan of salvation where people are encouraged to admit that they are a sinner, believe in the person and work of Jesus through the cross and resurrection, and confess Jesus as your Savior and Lord.



interviews, students were asked to share their faith story, to share about the opportunities that they had been given to share that faith story with others, and to share how their faith story impacts their daily life. The IVC interviews consisted of 11 students. Of the elements taught as components of a faith story throughout the “This Is My Story” series and outlined in the surveys with the series, the IVC students had the following items in each of their stories:

- Answered Prayer Requests- 0% (no responses)
- Conversion Experience- 100% (11 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God’s Presence- 45.5% (5 responses)
- Moments Where You Felt God Used You- 0% (no responses)
- People Who Encouraged You- 100% (11 responses)
- Trials/Troubles- 72.8% (8 responses)

From the above data, the role of others in one’s own understanding of and growth in faith stands out as a constant in personal narratives along with a conversion experience followed by the role of trials and troubles in the shaping of faith and the moments where you felt God’s presence. With one of the goals of the “This Is My Story” series being that students would begin to see their own faith story as more than a transactional encounter with God, these interviews, along with the MBBC interviews, tend to point that this is still a major element in one’s story of faith, which it should be, but also other elements are beginning to influence this understanding as well.

Moving to the question involving the opportunity for students to share their own faith story, the IVC student data reflected the following:

- Students who had an opportunity to share and further explained their experience sharing.- 45.5% (5 responses)
- Students who simply answered “yes” with no further explanation. – 0% (no responses)
- Students who answered “no” that they hadn’t had an opportunity to share.- 54.5% (6 responses)

From the results of this question, more students from IVC had not shared their faith story with someone else than had shared their faith story. Of the those who had not had an opportunity to share or chosen not to share, the reasons were the following:

- “It’s not as impactful in conversation. I would rather share facts like Creationism because I think that it attracts more attention than my story.” (Junior Male)
- “No, my predicament is that I am a social kid that doesn’t get many social opportunities. I live in a Christian centered world with school, church, and Christian families so I don’t get many opportunities.” (Freshman Male)
- “No, I am shy about my faith, but I am not a shy person.” (6<sup>th</sup> Grade Female)
- “Not really, People are and or claim Christianity so it’s hard to share faith at a Christian school.” (7<sup>th</sup> Grade Male)

This lack of taking opportunities to share their story of faith with others stands in sharp contrast to the interview group from MBBC. This may point to a possible difference in overall teaching focuses of the two different student ministries with regard to outreach and engaging others with the gospel. This would be another area of potential further research.

The final interview question asked students “How has understanding your own story of faith helped you in your life?” From the IVC students interviewed, the answers fell in the following categories:

- God’s presence with me. – 36.4% (4 responses)
- God’s provision for me and my family. – 0% (no responses)
- Faith makes me a better person/causes me to make better decisions. – 36.4% (4 responses)
- Feel different because of my salvation. – 9% (1 response)
- Impacts how I live before others as an example. – 36.4% (4 responses)
- Seeking God through spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible study). – 27.2% (3 responses)
- Being active in church/Christian organizations to grow spiritually. – 0% (no responses)

For the IVC students surveyed, God’s presence with them throughout the day, faith helping to make them a better person and make better decisions, and their faith impacting how they live before others as an example defined how their story of faith is worked out in everyday life.

From listening to the 11 student interviews from IVC, some general observations can be made. First, students throughout the interviews students tended to focus on guilt. They felt guilty about their sin and like God was waiting to judge them for their lack of perfect performance. The constant reminder of guilt and not being enough could be due to the teaching approach that IVC may be taking with guilt and the gospel. This could be an area of further research. Second, the IVC students when they reflected on experiencing God’s presence spoke of supernatural events that were not present in the MBBC student interviews. These supernatural events included dreams, visions, and even a student who

experienced having a demon removed from him through a process of exorcism. The presence of these elements is likely to be traced in some part to the Charismatic teaching and background of the Vineyard Movement that would not have been focused on or taught in a Southern Baptist Church environment.

Throughout the student interviews from MBBC and IVC, the elements of a story of faith were clearly used in the student's own articulation of their own story of faith. The fact that many students had taken the opportunity to share their own story of faith with someone else and process how it changes the way that they live also points to the impact and importance of teaching stories of faith through a process like the "This Is My Story" series for students.

### **"Sharing Our Stories" Senior Discipleship Process**

The "Sharing Our Stories" senior discipleship process was the pinnacle of this research project. Of the eleven seniors that participated in our graduate Sunday in May of 2017, four participated in the "Sharing Our Stories" senior discipleship process. All four of the participants in the discipleship process were males. Though this number was not as many as hoped, it included the majority of the seniors that choose to stay active in student ministry in the spring of their senior year. These four students were taken through the teaching elements regarding how the story of the Bible parallels their own story, processed their stories through questions to guide their own personal reflection, met with the researcher to discuss their story, and shared their story with other students during Meadow Brook Baptist Church's Wednesday night student worship service.

The process of processing their own story through the “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” discussion guide began by looking at creation in parallel to the student’s beginnings of understandings of God. All four of the seniors’ background was that they were raised in church and so the moments of hearing about God go back as far as they could remember. Two of the seniors mentioned Vacation Bible School as a specific time when they remember hearing about God as a young child. One senior specifically mentioned remembering conversations with his parents regarding faith. In reflecting on their understandings of God as children, they mentioned the following:

- “Someone who was all powerful, and He could do whatever He wanted.”
- “The One that created the world, and His Son died for our sins.”
- “God is amazing. God loves us. We are sinners, and Jesus died for our sin.”
- “I understood God as a big, scary Being that was always watching us and made our lives harder when we sinned.”

The faith background of growing up in church and in Christian homes led these seniors to have in many ways a biblically-based understanding of who God is and how humans are to relate to Him. It would be interesting to read the responses to these questions from someone who did not have a heritage of faith.

The second section of the discipleship guide focuses on how the fall and its effect on faith and one’s personal struggles and their effect on faith parallel. The struggles of these students included putting cultural priorities over godly priorities, peer pressure, dealing with cancer diagnosis in their families, losing loved ones, lust, self-esteem and identity struggles, and depression. The struggles that these seniors faced were a combination of things that had happened to them and people around them as well as

struggles they had personally fallen into. When asked how they had seen God grow and change them in light of their struggles, some responded that God had made them “more mature in their faith” and made them “more of a willing servant and willing to do whatever is needed of me.” In reflecting on what things, ideas, or events have helped encourage them in their struggles, the seniors noted student ministry events, small group Bible studies, adult mentors, joining the church and student ministry, and going on mission trips. While processing the areas where the seniors felt like they needed to continue to grow, they noted a desire to grow in their own devotion and passion for God.

The third section in the discipleship guide focused on intersecting the narrative of redemption found in the scriptures with their own conversion experiences and God’s ongoing work in their lives. The seniors’ conversion experiences all centered around a moment that happened to them when they were very young. After this initial conversion experience, the seniors wrote of times of refocusing in their lives which included mission trips, youth camps, and moving churches to Meadow Brook Baptist Church. In reflecting on how they had seen the Holy Spirit at work in their lives changing them as they seek to walk with Jesus, the seniors noted:

- “I have become more mature with my faith.”
- “I’ve seen how the Holy Spirit has changed how I view friends and even others in my life. They have gone from just being people who I enjoy spending time with to people that I care about and want to help out in any way possible.”
- “I’ve grown more considerate of other’s needs. My life has been more enjoyable, and I usually feel good about every day.”

The teaching of redemption being an ongoing work of God in the life of a Christian is a helpful truth for these students who began to follow Jesus at such a young age. Though they may not have the memory and words to articulate the beginning of their faith journey, they can cling to the ways they have seen God continuing to mold them to be like Jesus.

The next section of the discipleship guide is about restoration and how God is using them to be a part of bringing his kingdom to the world. The seniors described mission trips, serving as a teacher at Vacation Bible School, and opportunities to witness to their faith at school as examples of moments where they felt God using them to make an impact. In reflecting on how they have seen God use their personalities and gifts to impact others, the seniors noted:

- “I’ve helped cheer others up through interactions with them via my job.”
- “My ability to become a friend with people easily has helped me in spreading the Word of God.”
- “I have seen God use me by allowing me to know what I am doing with the technology and equipment at church.”

When asked about people that God has allowed them to encourage, the seniors noted friends, small group leaders, mentors, parents, and youth group members. When asked who had helped encourage and influence them, the seniors mentioned parents, teachers, scout leaders, youth pastors, friends, mentors, and church staff members. Through this process of thinking about how God has used them and will continue to use them to make an impact, the seniors are able to see that God is real and is at work in their lives. This is

an important truth for these students to hold onto as they prepare to transition from student ministry into college and career.

The final question on the discipleship guide is “How do you see the faith foundation that you have developed impacting your life and decisions into college/career?” The seniors answered:

- “It will help me make decisions in the future because Christ has become an integral part of who I am and how I make decisions.”
- “It will help me make good and right decisions.”
- “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know, mainly because I don’t even know how the rest of my ‘foundations’ are going to impact my decisions.”

The foundation of faith, though the seniors may not know the specific workings out of that foundation, will serve as a guide for them in the next stages of life. The “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship process is designed to help get students thinking about how faith has impacted their past, present, and will impact their future. Only time will tell what the workings out of that faith will look like in the next chapter of these seniors’ stories.

After the seniors completed the “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” discussion guide, the researcher met with each one of the students one on one to discuss their process and story. These meetings were informal where the student would share what was on his heart, what God had raised in his mind through this process, and their story. For the researcher, this was the most encouraging and powerful part of the process. Through these meetings, it became apparent that the questions in the “Where ‘My Story’ Meets God’s Story” discussion guide did an excellent job of raising thoughts in the minds



and hearts of students. For some of the students, the questions had brought into light areas of their own life and story that the students had not ever processed before. These undisciplined places in the students included areas of struggle with sin that they had never shared with anyone else before as well as struggles with God's goodness in the midst of situations of sickness and death. This allowed the researcher great ministry moments through which he could speak life into the students and their stories. The process was very rewarding for the researcher as well as the seniors to gain a greater understanding of each other and how God works in and through our own lives and stories. Throughout these meetings, the seniors expressed how this process of personal self-discovery was very helpful and impactful to them individually.

Once the story development was complete, the seniors came together to share their stories to the rest of the student ministry in our Wednesday night worship service. A few of the seniors, who were more introverted, were nervous about the night and the opportunity to share with their peers. Yet despite their own nerves, they decided to share. The night of sharing was done through having all four seniors together with the researcher on the platform. Each student was introduced and given an opportunity to share their story. As the seniors shared, they were open and candid with the other students about their own life and struggles. The seniors reaffirmed to the group how God can use people despite their own flaws and struggles and that God has a plan to use ordinary people like them for his kingdom work. The seniors expressed to the group how powerful this process had been for them personally. The night was impactful for the other students as well. There was a level of focus in the room that was greater than usual, which shows through their attention that the students were interested in what had been

shared. At the end of the night, several students from the junior class came up to the researcher to make sure that they would have an opportunity to be a part of this process next year and be able to share their story as well.

The “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process was a very effective tool to help seniors both speak of the importance of their faith journey to the rest of the youth group as well as a tool to help seniors have a framework to look at God’s work in their own lives. This is a process that the researcher plans to repeat with every class of graduating seniors. Within the context of the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church, the “Sharing Our Stories” discipleship process is going to become an annual rite of passage for our senior class.

### **End of First Semester Senior Follow Up**

At the end of their first semester in college, the high school seniors who participated in the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship process participated in a one-on-one interview where they responded to questions to determine how their understanding of their own story had impacted their decisions and first semester of college. The first question that was asked is “How have you seen your own understanding of your own story of faith change/grow in your first semester in college?” The responses were:

- “Visiting different churches has challenged me to think more about what I believe.”
- “My faith has become more missions oriented because I have joined a missions group at school. I am trying to take what I learned as a child to a global standpoint and across cultures.”

- “I feel like I am thinking different and approaching God in a more mature way.”
- “I am beginning to understand that you don’t necessarily have to be in a church to be a Christian. I have had a hard time finding a church. I am learning that it is more about one-on-one time with God.”

From these responses, it is encouraging to see that all of the students involved in the “Sharing Our Stories” senior discipleship plan have tried to become a part of a local congregation while in college. However, the response of the lack of seeing the importance of a community of faith is discouraging and is likely due to not being able to find a congregation in which he feels like he belongs.

The second follow up question is “How have you seen God work in your life this semester?” The students responded with the following answers:

- “I have been able to get involved with a small group Bible study in which I have developed a good friendship with an older student who mentors me. We meet together weekly and read God’s Word together.”
- “I didn’t have a roommate this semester, which has been hard with my depression struggles. I am learning that I have to push myself to have a daily quiet time and to pursue Jesus.”
- “I am going to Bible studies more often, and God is speaking to me through Bible verses.”
- “I wouldn’t say something big, but He has been there when I needed Him. God has helped me with homesickness and has provided comfort when I needed it.”

God’s presence and provision for these students while they are learning to navigate life and faith on their own shows that though they know where true hope and provision is

found in times of need. Though only seeking God in times of need could possibly be characterized as a symptom of MTD, the fact that they are turning to God shows the foundation of faith that was laid for them.

The third follow up question that was asked is “Have you had an opportunity to share your faith story with others? If so, what happened?” The students responded:

- “Not really besides with the student who is mentoring me.”
- “Yes, I have shared my story in my global missions group as well as with an atheist in school who grew up in the faith and turned away.”
- “Yes, I shared my story with my Bible study group.”
- “No, it is hard enough just meeting people.”

Though all but one of the students did not share their story with someone outside the community of faith, they were able to use and share their stories as they came into new communities of faith. The power of story is seen even in the fact that the Bible study group would ask people to share their stories of faith.

The fourth question is “How has your faith impacted your life/decisions into college/career?” The responses of the students were:

- “I don’t go to parties based on my personality. I make going to my college Bible study a priority even though it is inconvenient at times to go.”
- “My music group at school is not very Christian. There is alcohol at parties that I am invited to, and I am called the preacher’s kid and seen as that. I am trying to balance keeping morals, knowing what is right for me, and being friends with them.”
- “There are so many tempting things that the Lord has protected me from.”
- “I haven’t run into any situations where I have been directly challenged.”

These responses show a wrestling with identity and faith that every college student faces. From the student's responses, they are seeking to honor Jesus with their decisions while also seeking to understand where they fit and what they believe.

The fifth question is "Do you feel like your faith foundation has well equipped you? Why?" The responses were:

- "Yes, I can understand and question doctrine and teaching in the churches I have visited."
- "Yes, I have had options to make stupid decisions, and I feel like I am well prepared to make the right decision."
- "Yes, the church prepared me by giving me a strong belief and view about God."
- "Yes, my time at MBBC helped boost my confidence and make me feel better about myself. The person that I was prior to coming to MBBC didn't come with me to college, and that is a good thing."

The student's understanding of how their faith foundation impacts their life and decisions in college is encouraging, yet this is always an area where the church can continue to look to grow. Additional research could be done with the areas that need to be more effectively addressed to form the foundation of faithfulness for college.

From these follow up interviews, it is evident that faith is an important part of these student's life after a first semester in college. Though one of them is not involved in a faith community, the fact that the other three are actively involved in faith communities where they are known and challenged to follow Jesus is encouraging.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout this research process, the initial objectives were:

1. Create a shift in the thinking of students at MBBC and IVC regarding the role of God's work in their lives toward the end that they might see their testimony as an ongoing work of God in their lives.
2. See high school seniors begin to take a deeper ownership of their own faith through a rite of passage experience for our high school seniors, in which they will discover the power of the ongoing work of God in each other's spiritual journey. These students' spiritual journeys will also be shared with the rest of the students in our student ministry through senior share nights.
3. Provide resources and training materials to be used by other churches in order to help students to begin to own their own faith and spiritual growth through a rite of passage process for their seniors.

All three of these objectives have been met through this process for those students surveyed. For objective 1, the student questionnaires and interviews as well as the senior discipleship plan point to students' growing understanding of testimony being broader than simply an initial conversion experience. Though this is a process that for some is just beginning, it is a process of teaching that will have to be continually reemphasized and reinforced until the cultural mindset has changed. For objective 2, the seniors, who participated in the "Sharing Our Stories" senior discipleship project, gained greater understanding of God's work in their own lives and shared that work with others. For objective 3, the rite of passage resources for other churches have been developed for the "This Is My Story" teaching series and the "Sharing Our Stories" senior discipleship

project. Through this project, the faith of students in the student ministry at Meadow Brook Baptist Church and Inverness Vineyard Church were deepened, the understanding of God's work in the lives of real people and in the world was expanded, and tools were created to help others explore their own story to be shared with others.

Another result of this process is the relational connections that the discipleship process made between students and other adults in the church. There were strong relational ties built between the students and the adults that helped them to process their own stories. Through sharing struggles, needs, and longings and how Jesus is faithful in those things, the Holy Spirit helps to establish strong connections. By listening to other's stories, students were also opened to having relationships with them as well once they began to understand that struggles to follow Jesus are not limited to one generation. These connections to God's faithfulness to His people in His church allowed students to see how God works. In seeing God's work in the church, student were given an opportunity to see the importance of a long-term and every stage connection to the local church. Spiritual journeys were never meant to be walked alone. God gives us both the Holy Spirit and Christian community in a local church to walk alongside us.

The process that has been created through this thesis-project is not without some challenges. The application of this thesis-project was performed on two different youth groups that were very similar in demographics. The results of this process would possibly be very different within a less homogeneous sample size. Students with lower income levels or who do not have both parents in the home could respond totally different to this process. Those students who do not come from a believing family could also respond differently to the project. A larger sample size with multiple youth groups of different

racial, economic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds would possibly yield different results.

Another challenge to this thesis-project could come from those who do not agree with the understanding of testimony that is articulated throughout this thesis-project. Many in the researcher's own denomination are likely to resist the idea of testimony being an ongoing work of God in one's life while preferring to view testimony simply as a salvation moment at the beginning of a relationship with Jesus. The reframing of testimony as an ongoing work of God not only redefines the presentation of the gospel to student but also redefines how ministry success is measured within many churches in the researcher's own denomination. The moving of the metric off of a decision point, which in many churches is counted and then demonstrated in the sacrament of baptism, is something that will come with great hesitation. The researcher would point to the biblical precedent of repent and believe as well as the examples of spiritual journeys displayed in the stories of major biblical characters as reasons that the church should seek to follow the Bible rather than what might be comfortable and traditional.

With this redefinition of testimony comes the challenge of effective articulation. There are many discussions that will need to be had with pastors and church leaders as well as students to articulate conversion and the process of sanctification in a way that is clear to students as well as grounded in faithfulness to the Bible.

### **Future Research**

For further research, this thesis-project has raised many potential opportunities. First, it would be interesting to compare the role of believer's baptism versus infant



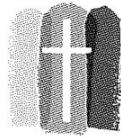
baptism and its effect on a student's own understanding and articulation of their stories of faith. Since both MBBC and IVC are churches that teach believers baptism, it is likely that the stories of faith would be different from someone from a Methodist or Presbyterian tradition where infant baptism is practiced.

Second, taking into account the teachings and trainings in MBBC and IVC regarding salvation would help gain a greater understanding of a student's own journey of faith. From the interviews with students, it is clear that curriculum in certain classes and trainings affected them and the articulation of their experiences with salvation and baptism. A further exploration of these materials may help shed greater light on the elements present in a student's own journey of faith.

Third, the possible link between personality types (extroverted and introverted) and sharing one's story with others could be further explored. This could be done by personality typing the students in the research project through personality tests to see if there is a link between personality and likelihood of sharing.

Fourth, further research could be done on the best phrase to use to communicate the conversion experience moment within a student's story. In seeking to not put the sole focus on a student's faith journey on the moment of conversion, the possible terms of "starting line," "beginning," or even a "starter log" using the image analogy from 2 Timothy could be helpful. These ideas would need to be tested and further explored with students.

**APPENDIX 1**  
**PASTOR CHRIS JONES PERMISSION LETTER**



**Meadow Brook**  
BAPTIST CHURCH

August 23, 2016

To Whom It May Concern,

Ben Birdsong has my permission to utilize the students of Meadow Brook Baptist Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry project, as long as he obtains parent consent. Ben's love for Christ and for students is evident, and I look forward to seeing and hearing how his DMin studies and project strengthen his overall understanding of and passion for discipleship among students.

Sincerely,

Chris Jones  
Senior Pastor  
Meadow Brook Baptist Church

4984 Meadow Brook Road Birmingham, AL 35242 205.991.8384

**APPENDIX 2**  
**MBBC INITIAL STUDENT SURVEY FOR THE “THIS IS MY STORY” SERIES**

**Sharing Your Story Survey**  
**Beginning of the “This Is My Story” Series**

Please complete the following survey questions to the best of your ability.

**Background Information**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** Male or Female **Race:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Years in Church:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Years at Meadow Brook Baptist:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Multiple Choice Questions**

*Please answer the following questions by selecting the most relevant answer choice(s) for each question.*

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you? (Circle One)**

Not Important      Slightly Important      Important      Very Important

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is useful to others? (Circle One)**

Not Useful      Slightly Useful      Useful      Very Useful

**How is it useful to others? (Circle One or More of the Following)**

☐ Encouragement to Others for Strengthening Their Faith

☐ Evangelism Tool for Those who Don't Know Jesus

☐ Other (Please List): \_\_\_\_\_

**How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others? (Circle One)**

Not Comfortable      Slightly Comfortable      Comfortable      Very Comfortable

**What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith? (Circle One or More of the Following):**

- Answered Prayer Requests
- Conversion Experience
- Moments Where You Felt God's Presence
- Moments Where God Used You
- People Who Encouraged You
- Trials/Troubles

**APPENDIX 3**  
**MBBC CONCLUDING STUDENT SURVEY FOR THE “THIS IS MY STORY”  
SERIES**

**Sharing Your Story Survey**  
**Conclusion to “This Is My Story” Series**

Please complete the following survey questions to the best of your ability.

**Background Information**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** Male or Female **Race:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Years in Church:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Years at Meadow Brook Baptist:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Multiple Choice Questions**

*Please answer the following questions by selecting the most relevant answer choice(s) for each question.*

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you? (Circle One)**

Not Important      Slightly Important      Important      Very Important

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is useful to others? (Circle One)**

Not Useful      Slightly Useful      Useful      Very Useful

**How is it useful to others? (Circle One or More of the Following)**

- ☐ Encouragement to Others for Strengthening Their Faith
- ☐ Evangelism Tool for Those who Don't Know Jesus
- ☐ Other (Please List): \_\_\_\_\_

**How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others? (Circle One)**

Not Comfortable      Slightly Comfortable      Comfortable      Very Comfortable

**What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith? (Circle One or More of the Following):**

- Answered Prayer Requests
- Conversion Experience
- Moments Where You Felt God's Presence
- Moments Where God Used You
- People Who Encouraged You
- Trials/Troubles

**Discussion Questions**

How has hearing someone's story of faith impacted you?

How can you use your story of faith to impact others?

**APPENDIX 4**  
**IVC INITIAL STUDENT SURVEY FOR THE “THIS IS MY STORY” SERIES**

**Sharing Your Story Survey**  
**Beginning of the “This Is My Story” Series**

Please complete the following survey questions to the best of your ability.

**Background Information**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** Male or Female **Race:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Years in Church:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Years at Inverness Vineyard Church:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Multiple Choice Questions**

*Please answer the following questions by selecting the most relevant answer choice(s) for each question.*

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you? (Circle One)**

Not Important      Slightly Important      Important      Very Important

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is useful to others? (Circle One)**

Not Useful      Slightly Useful      Useful      Very Useful

**How is it useful to others? (Circle One or More of the Following)**

- ☐ Encouragement to Others for Strengthening Their Faith
- ☐ Evangelism Tool for Those who Don't Know Jesus
- ☐ Other (Please List): \_\_\_\_\_

**How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others? (Circle One)**

Not Comfortable      Slightly Comfortable      Comfortable      Very Comfortable

**What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith? (Circle One or More of the Following):**

- Answered Prayer Requests
- Conversion Experience
- Moments Where You Felt God's Presence
- Moments Where God Used You
- People Who Encouraged You
- Trials/Troubles



**APPENDIX 5**  
**IVC CONCLUDING STUDENT SURVEY FOR THE “THIS IS MY STORY”  
SERIES**

**Sharing Your Story Survey**  
**Conclusion to “This Is My Story” Series**

Please complete the following survey questions to the best of your ability.

**Background Information**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** Male or Female **Race:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Years in Church:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Years at Inverness Vineyard Church:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Multiple Choice Questions**

*Please answer the following questions by selecting the most relevant answer choice(s) for each question.*

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is important to you? (Circle One)**

Not Important      Slightly Important      Important      Very Important

**Do you think that your story of faith is something that is useful to others? (Circle One)**

Not Useful      Slightly Useful      Useful      Very Useful

**How is it useful to others? (Circle One or More of the Following)**

- ☐ Encouragement to Others for Strengthening Their Faith
- ☐ Evangelism Tool for Those who Don't Know Jesus
- ☐ Other (Please List): \_\_\_\_\_

**How comfortable are you in sharing your own story of faith with others? (Circle One)**

Not Comfortable      Slightly Comfortable      Comfortable      Very Comfortable

**What elements do you think should be a part of your story of faith? (Circle One or More of the Following):**

- Answered Prayer Requests
- Conversion Experience
- Moments Where You Felt God's Presence
- Moments Where God Used You
- People Who Encouraged You
- Trials/Troubles

**Discussion Questions**

How has hearing someone's story of faith impacted you?

How can you use your story of faith to impact others?

**APPENDIX 6**  
**“THIS IS MY STORY” SERIES INITIAL MESSAGE NOTES**

**Living a Compelling Faith Story**

**2 Timothy 1:3-7**

**This Is My Story**

- Introduction:
  - We all love a good story.
    - Story Images
      - *Jason Bourne*
        - A secret agent seeking to determine who to trust and how to survive.
      - *Secret Life of Pets*
        - Max on an adventure to find his owner.
      - *Captain America Civil War*
        - Maybe you find yourself at odds with your friend trying to determine whether it is right to obey the law or not.
  - Stories captivate our hearts and captivate our lives, but the reality is that for many of us we miss the fact that our life is such a story.
  - If there were to be a movie written about your life, would it be a compelling story?
  - When we think of church and stories, we typically think of a testimony.
    - When we think of testimonies, we typically think of two things:
      - Dramatic Conversion Story
        - On drugs and God changed my life.
        - Got hit by a car, saw a vision, and decided to follow Jesus.
        - We think that since our story may be not as dramatic as the testimonies we frequently think of that our testimony is not important.
        - Tonight and throughout this series, we will see that God’s providential work in our lives is a great story of grace whether we were saved from jail or from the back pew.
      - Testimonies Consist Solely of a Conversion Experience
        - When we think of testimonies, we frequently end them with the praying of a prayer, the walking of an aisle, or getting baptized.
        - But the reality is that these things are supposed to mark a beginning of a life-long journey with Jesus rather than being the beginning and the ending of a person’s story.
        - Throughout this series, it is my hope that you begin to understand through the stories of others that God is writing a story of His grace in your own life.

- Tonight, we are going to begin our journey by looking at a glimpse into the faith journey of Timothy and how Paul called Timothy to continue to seek to allow God to write His story with Timothy's life.
- Read 2 Timothy 1:3-7
- **Our faith is influenced by others who have laid a foundation - v. 5**
  - Timothy was blessed with a foundation of faith.
  - Though I am sure there were times when Timothy struggled with the faith of his grandmother and mother, the faith of these people served as a rock on which Timothy's faith can stand.
  - Like many of us in this room, Timothy came from a Christian home with a Christian mother and grandmother that were a source of wisdom and encouragement to him.
    - Their faith served as a constant witness and encouragement to him.
  - **When you think about your own lives, who set a foundation for your faith?**
    - Parents
    - Dave Wood
    - Ronnie Adkins
- **Our faith must become our own faith. - v. 5**
  - The faith that was in Lois and Eunice was something that Timothy himself had to embrace on his own.
  - He couldn't live through his mother and grandmother's faith. He must have a faith of his own.
  - *First Priority Story- embracing faith*
  - Part of being a teenager is determining who you are. You are determining what you value, who you will become, how you will live, and what you will believe.
  - As you are on this journey, chances are you will begin to have questions and even doubts about your own faith:
    - Is God real?
    - How do I know that God is there?
    - Does God care?
    - How can a good God allow bad things to happen?
  - As you wrestle with questions and doubts, I would encourage you to not be afraid to wrestle and ask God, the Bible, and Christians who are around you to help you seek answers.
  - It is in our wrestlings and doubts that God can reveal Himself to be the one who cannot be fully explained yet the One who is fully present.
  - **Is the faith becoming your own faith?**
- **Our faith must be practiced. - v. 6-7**
  - Paul calls Timothy to fan into flame the gift of grace within him.
    - *Lighter*
    - A flame is something that can easily lose focus and burn out, yet it is also something that can be the start of something large and all consuming.

- When you think of your faith as a flame, is your flame simply a small spark or is it a huge fire?
  - We fan the flame by:
    - Reading the Word
    - Seeking God in Worship and Prayer
    - Applying the Word
    - Living the Gospel
      - Boldly/powerfully- v. 7
      - Lovingly- v. 7
      - With Self Control- v. 7
  - **Are you practicing your faith? Do you have people around you to hold you accountable for practicing your faith?**
- Conclusion
  - If you are a Christian, God is writing a story of faith with your life.
    - Is it a good story that showcases Jesus and His power in your life?
    - Is it a story where Jesus cannot even be detected in your life?
      - “You are the only Bible that some people will ever read.”
  - If you are not a Christian, God is calling you into a bigger story.
    - Gospel Presentation
  - Response:
    - Come to talk more about beginning a story with Jesus.
    - Come and pray that God would lead you to live a more compelling story.

**APPENDIX 7**  
**“THIS IS MY STORY” SERIES CONCLUDING MESSAGE NOTES**

**The God Who Writes Our Story**

**2 Peter 1:3-4**

**This Is My Story**

- Introduction:
  - We are coming to the final chapter of what has been an amazing series hearing about how God has worked in the lives of people who are seeking to follow Him.
  - We have heard from coaches, retirees, moms, dads, football players, principals, and evangelists.
  - They have all shared their stories and led us to understand that our faith journey doesn't end the moment we get saved (walk and aisle, pray a prayer, get baptized, etc.). It is an ongoing journey of walking with a God who is sufficient even when we are not.
  - Tonight, I am going to share some general observations from the stories over the last few months, and then, we will look at God's Word at the character of the God who is writing our story.
- **Every person's faith journey:**
  - **Looks different.**
    - Some people relate God in different ways than others:
      - Some people may deeply connect to God in prayer.
      - Others may connect with him in worship in a very close way.
      - Others may connect with him through deep study.
    - Some people's faith is expressed in different ways than others:
      - Some people are very vocal and forward about what they believe.
      - Others may live a life of faithfulness and pray for God to open doors for conversations with others.
  - **Contains ups and downs.**
    - No one's life ultimately goes according to their plans and hopes.
    - Part of the journey of faith is learning how to trust God and walk with Him both in the good times and the bad times.
    - The challenges in our lives should drive us deeper into our relationship with Jesus rather than push us away.
    - We must realize that whether we are in a good time or a bad time that God is still God and His promises are still true.
  - **Consists of times of faithfulness and times of wonderings.**
    - There is no one who has a spotless Christian life except Jesus.
    - We all have moments we can look at in our own lives where we feel like we did things that honored God and we could feel God's approval of us.
    - We are all prone to wonder off and lose sight of the walk of faith.

- In our times of wondering, do we have people to call us out, to remind us of the path Jesus calls us to walk, and to pray for us.
  - **Includes times of great faith and times of doubt.**
    - Doubt is not the enemy to faith.
    - When we face times of doubt, which we all will at one time in our Christian life or another, are we allowing our questions to drive us to God.
    - Wrestling with your own doubts to determine who you are and what you truly believe is a part of your faith growing to become your own faith.
  - **Points to a God who is sufficient.**
    - The person sharing was not the hero in any of the stories that were shared.
    - God alone is the hero.
    - He alone is sufficient.
    - The same God that was with every story-teller and every biblical character is the same God who is at work in your heart and life if you are a follower of Him.
- Read 2 Peter 1:3-4
- **God is the one who gives us the power to live the Christian life. - v. 3a**
  - Christianity is not simply something that we add to our lives to make our goodness a little better.
  - The gospel cuts to the bottom of our pride and reminds us that we can never do it on our own, and we are deeply in need of God's grace and power.
  - The reality is that we don't merely need the gospel when we get saved. We need to remind ourselves of the gospel everyday.
  - This is why Peter drives us as his readers back to the power source.
  - There is One who can lead and guide you to live a life that follows after Jesus, and that is the Holy Spirit at work in and through you.
  - We are simply the light bulbs plugged into God's lamp to shine the light in a dark world.
- **God has called us to display His greatness to the world.- v. 3b**
  - When we shine as lights into the world, we display God's greatness.
  - This week, we had a super moon. For those, like me, that know very little about science, it meant that the moon was HUGE.
  - The moon's function is the same as our function as Christians. Just like the moon reflects the sun so that the world can see it. Our calling is to reflect the glory of God so that the world around us can see it.
  - Are we reflecting the glory of God with our lives?
  - When people look at us, do they see God's greatness or do they see our sin and our own greatness?
  - The reality of the gospel is that God's greatness shines the clearest when people can look at us and the way we live and realize that it is only due to God's work in our lives that we can be who we are.
  - But for grace, where would we be.

- Our sins and compromises with the world also block our ability to display the greatness of God to the world.
- Are there areas in your life where you are choosing to compromise that is blocking your ability to display God's glory to the world around you?
- **God has given us His promises which lead us to look more and more like Him. - v. 4a**
  - We become more like God by putting His Word into action.
  - As we read and study God's Word, our minds and hearts will become more molded to God and His priorities.
  - This is why it is essential as a Christian that you are in God's Word daily.
  - Though the daily discipline of reading God's Word may seem difficult and hard to start, you are not going to see growth in your own Christian walk into you start spending time in God's Word.
  - Just like an athlete has to learn the plays of his or her team by practicing in order to be successful on the field, so we must learn the mindsets and priorities of a Christian which are learned through a faithful study of God's Word.
- **God has rescued us from the power that sin held us and leads us to live as His agents of change in the world. - v. 4b**
  - Though sometimes you and I may feel overwhelmed with the world and the sin that surrounds us, the reality is that in Jesus we have the victory over sin and darkness.
  - Though we have been set free from the chains of sin, we still live our lives with those chains.
  - We have been set free from our old lives and the sin that entangled us, yet we so often run back to that.
  - We have been set free to be agents of change. God has each one of us here on the planet to bring the change of the gospel and His kingdom to earth.
  - God's kingdom is not supposed to simply be something that happens in eternity. God's kingdom and priorities are being brought to this world here and now through His church.
  - Are you living the love, grace, and priorities of God's kingdom?
  - Are you an agent of change?
  - How may God be calling you to be an agent of change in your world?
- **Conclusion**
  - Our lives are a story. If we are a follower of Jesus, this is a story that God is writing.
  - Are we looking to God as the Author and Guide of our stories?
  - Do our stories reflect God's priorities?
  - Do our stories result in positive changes for Jesus and His kingdom in the world?



## APPENDIX 8

### “SHARING OUR STORIES” SENIOR DISCIPLESHIP PRESENTATION



*Senior Discipleship Model*

**Sharing Your Story**


Meadow Brook Baptist Church  
Class of 2017  
April 23rd, 2017

**Where “My Story” Meets God’s Story**

**Act 1: Creation**




**Act 1: Creation**




- ✧ God stands as the originator of life and the world as we know it. - Genesis 1:1-3

**Act 1: Creation**



- ✧ God stands as the originator of life and the world as we know it. - Genesis 1:1-3
- ✧ God created humans as the highlight of his creative order in His image. - Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:7

**Act 1: Creation**



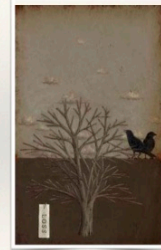
- ✧ God stands as the originator of life and the world as we know it. - Genesis 1:1-3
- ✧ God created humans as the highlight of his creative order in His image. - Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:7
- ✧ God commanded humans to be His regents of His plan on the planet to multiply and lead the earth. - Genesis 1:28

## Act 1: Creation

- ✧ God stands as the originator of life and the world as we know it. - Genesis 1:1-3
- ✧ God created humans as the highlight of his creative order in His image. - Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:7
- ✧ God commanded humans to be His regents of His plan on the planet to multiply and lead the earth. - Genesis 1:28
- ✧ God declared His creation as good. - Genesis 1:31

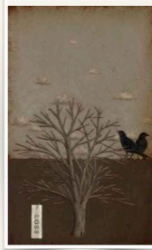


## Act 2: Fall



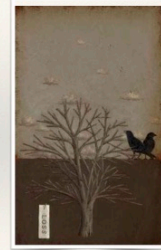
## Act 2: Fall

- ✧ Sin is a distortion of the goodness and goal of creation. - Genesis 3:1-7



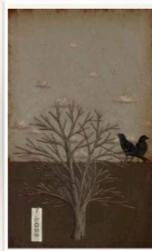
## Act 2: Fall

- ✧ Sin is a distortion of the goodness and goal of creation. - Genesis 3:1-7
- ✧ Sin effects everyone. - Romans 3:23

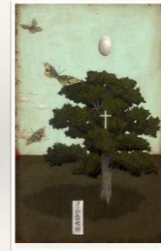


## Act 2: Fall

- ✧ Sin is a distortion of the goodness and goal of creation. - Genesis 3:1-7
- ✧ Sin effects everyone. - Romans 3:23
- ✧ Sin leads to death and consequences for life here and now. - Romans 6:23

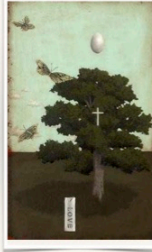


## Act 3: Redemption



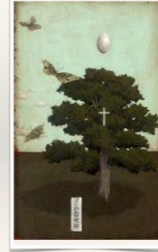
### Act 3: Redemption

- ✧ The plan of redemption is promised as soon as sin begins to distort creation. - Genesis 3:15



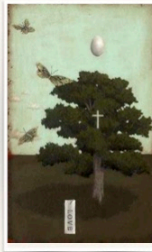
### Act 3: Redemption

- ✧ The plan of redemption is promised as soon as sin begins to distort creation. - Genesis 3:15
- ✧ Jesus made us love and changed the direction of our lives by grace through faith. - Ephesians 2:1-9



### Act 3: Redemption

- ✧ The plan of redemption is promised as soon as sin begins to distort creation. - Genesis 3:15
- ✧ Jesus made us love and changed the direction of our lives by grace through faith. - Ephesians 2:1-9
- ✧ Jesus took our punishment at the cross so that we could receive the blessings of God. - Galatians 3:13-14



### Act 4: Restoration



### Act 4: Restoration

- ✧ God has made us to join Him in restoration. - Ephesians 2:10

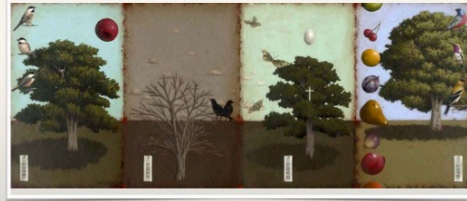


### Act 4: Restoration

- ✧ God has made us to join Him in restoration. - Ephesians 2:10
- ✧ One day Jesus will return to make all things new. - Revelation 21:1-5



## Next Steps in “My Story”



*Senior Discipleship Model*

## Sharing Your Story

Meadow Brook Baptist  
Church  
Class of 2017  
April 23rd, 2017

## Where “My Story” Meets God’s Story

## My Story: Your Beginnings of Understandings of God

- 205

**Act 2: Fall**  
**My Story: Sin and Struggles and Its Effect on Your Faith**

## My Story: Sin and Struggles and Its Effect on Your Faith

- What are some struggles/misplaced priorities that you remember experiencing prior to following Jesus?
- What have been idols that you have struggled with putting before your relationship with Jesus?
- What are some areas of struggle where you have seen God grow and change you since coming to know Jesus?

- **Marker:** What are some times in your life when you have been through trials, struggles, or hard times where you have seen God work in you?
- What things, ideas, or events have helped encourage you in your struggles with sin or the results of the fall on the world?
- Where are some places where you are still seeking the Holy Spirit to work?



## Act 3: Redemption

### My Story: Conversion and the Ongoing Work of God in Your Life

- **Marker:** Describe what happened when you first remember surrendering to Jesus as your Savior and Lord?
- **Marker:** When are some times when you have refocused yourself to continue to follow after Jesus?
- Describe how you have seen the Holy Spirit at work continuing to grow and change you as you have walked with Jesus?



## **Act 4: Restoration**

### **My Story: How Is God Using You to Help Redeem the World?**

- **Marker:** Describe a time when you felt like God was using you to make an impact.
  
- How have you seen God use your personality and gifts to make a positive impact on the world around you?
  
- Who are people that you have been able to encourage/walk with through struggles and challenges that you may have faced as well?

- **Marker:** Who are people who have encouraged you in your faith by serving examples and by challenging you in your own life?

## **Next Steps in “My Story”**

- How do you see the faith foundation that you have developed impacting your life and decisions into college/career?

## **“My Story”**

Use the space below to write your story using the ideas/thoughts raised by the questions in this packet.

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